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Great Days



*My Father—eighty—
at his favourite pool*

G R E A T D A Y S

*being mainly concerned
: with rod and gun :*

by
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TO MY
FATHER AND MOTHER

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GREAT DAYS

CHAPTER I

EARLY DAYS

WHAT, I wonder, are my very earliest sporting reminiscences? The first, I think, is of a very small boy and a very large fishing-rod; of an arch, a big worm floating peacefully beneath it, and a good deal of agitated suspense above. And the place, the little village of Ashton Keynes.

It was a very large rod in my baby fingers, but I held it very tight, a piece of line firmly clamped between the fingers of my left hand, not exactly knowing why, but because that was how I'd seen my father doing it. "There's a walloping big fish under there," I'd overheard him remark to my mother, as they wandered away up-stream, "but he doesn't seem moving to-day."

And now the thrill of it! To be left alone in supreme possession. To be fishing for a walloping big fish—even if it wasn't moving much . . . but, ah! . . . what—what was that! A gentle tingling at the left hand, a tiny tugging feeling—new and wonderful experience, sending the blood surging in hot waves down my spine. . . . Consternation!—What-

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ever to do? Hang on to that line with grim determination.—A terrific tug—a yell—“Hi! Daddy! Daddy!—Something’s tugging . . . !” A sharply legging figure, a shouted, “*The line, boy! Let out the line!*”—but now, alas!—too late. . . .

There is another dim picture, about the same period it must have been, a picnic party down by that part of the river known as Sou’moor. Dim recollections float across me of a broad and pleasant stream, of deeply hanging banks, green and verdant on this bank where we munched our hunks of bread and jam, heavily wooded away over on the other. The hot air full of flies—mayflies, fat and succulent. They seem to swarm. My father’s back is clustered with them. I see him down there, a lithe, dark-coated figure (unlike most parsons, who generally seem to forsake the black clerical garb for something a little less austere when indulging their sporting bents, my father would never wear any other; and, indeed, I believe it greatly accounts for how he always seems able to get so close to a rising fish without scaring it), crouched low at the water edge, of a suddenly doubled rod, of a tremendous splashing away under the distant bank, of a sharply straightening rod, a fist waved furiously in the air. . . .

Just that. Nothing more. A queer, dim, but very exact picture, sharply cut off at either end. Not the slightest recollection of any other tiniest incident connected, save what I have recorded here. Yet to-day, forty-five odd years since, though the stream is now silted up and shallow, though much of the old copse has gone, the banks rat-holed and broken away, were you to ask me, I would still faithfully point out to you the place where I saw that big trout splashing.

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In those days the river had but recently had the dredger up it. There were no great towns, with their mighty reservoirs, tapping the water-sheds. The stream ran deep and with a fine head of water. Dark, over-shadowed pools lay at the bends. Here and there, where the roadway passed across, picturesque grey stone bridges spanned the deep waters with their long, low arches. And under these selfsame arches great trout, working their way up-stream from the lower reaches in flood time to the gravelly spawning beds, would stay there and make their home. It was generally impossible to get at them with the fly. They never showed themselves by day, only taking heavy toll of the smaller fish by night. They were better out of it than in. A fat worm or a minnow was the only way. In any case the river was poorly preserved; poaching was a flourishing trade. If we didn't get those big fellows, most certainly the poachers would.

As I grew older I began to accompany my father on his fishing jaunts. It was my proud privilege to carry his landing net. At first that was all, that and the hearty objurgations to "keep out of the way of the blessed fly": for, at first, it was none too easy always, in my desire not to miss a thing, not to draw too near and be hooked up instead of the trout. But one day I was allowed to land a fish.

Now the netter's task, particularly when the fish is a big 'un and the wielder of the rod apt to wax excitable or irascible at times, is one of no small skill. To make oneself as small as possible, to obliterate oneself from trampling feet and singing line, yet be there all ready at the crucial time, low crouched not to scare the weakening trout, as slowly and in weakening rushes it draws nearer and nearer to mouth of net laid flat and motionless on river bed ; to raise that net, and

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engulf the speckled beauty at the proper time, it's all a matter which calls for skill and dexterity and no small experience.

But that poor first trout of mine! In the excitement I lost my nerve entirely. I chased it wildly and flappingly, altogether deaf to my father's roars and entreaties. I got the line inextricably entangled in the net. Fortunately the gut was stout, the fish not a very big one. It came shooting out—suddenly and very unexpectedly, firmly adhering by the nose to the ring of the net. But thereafter, and a little advice added, I soon became expert.

One day—it must have been when I was about eight—I was fitted out with a rod, an ancient one fortunately, and permitted to worm the pools and arches in the wake of my father and his fly. Worm-fishing as compared with the fly is a slow process, so I was frequently a little out-distanced. One particularly attractive pool kept me so occupied that my father had disappeared round a bend and into the next field before I realised what was happening—and there were cows in my field. I reeled in my worm hurriedly and legged after him like a young hare.

Now a rod is a top-heavy thing and full of awkwardnesses at best of times. But, if you've got to run with it, the best people will always tell you that it's as well to keep the point behind and not in front of you—a minor matter of detail which dug itself into my small brain at the same moment that the top of the rod did exactly the same thing in the turf, described an artistic curve, and went off with a gigantic snap.

That was disaster if you like! I stood rooted to the spot with horror. The cows were completely blotted out. I could have wept. To be entrusted with a rod for the first time and to end like this! I can still

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picture my father's face. It was an ancient rod, but an old favourite. But he really took it very well. I crept along in the lowest depths of misery, and wondered sadly if death by drowning would perhaps be sufficient expiation.

But presently, rather more for something to do than anything else, I detached the piece of shattered rod and half-heartedly, by means of what was left, dangled the worm in under a deeply overhanging root. And then the miracle occurred. Hardly had the worm gone in than there was a sudden terrific tug at the slack. Wildly I paid out the line. There was a tremendous commotion far away under the tangle of root and branch. No doubt about it whatsoever: a heavy fish. My running line slowed down, came to a stop. Whole-heartedly I raised my voice aloft. My father arrived, breathless and panting; took charge, to my profound relief. And just as well! It was a beautiful two and a half pounder we landed between us after a tremendous battle. I should most certainly have lost it, amid all that tangle of weed and root. Funny, but the incident of the broken rod was completely forgotten. I honestly don't believe my father ever remembered it again, in the excitement of getting that great fish and displaying it when we got home.

I did, however, and it was a lesson well and cheaply learnt. Not so very many years later I saw a full-grown man do the very identical thing and with a brand-new split-cane rod. Some of us are not so fortunate as others—a platitude, no doubt, but horribly true for all that. It just happened that it was I who got off the lightest.

Somehow the river seems always to loom up as a sort of natural background to one's memory. It

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seemed to be part of one's life from the very beginning. Wherever you went there it was. It meandered slowly through the village, glinting and gay when the sun shone, grey and rather cold when it didn't. Whenever you wanted to turn down a side street you crossed it. Bridges everywhere. Broad road bridges; narrow foot-bridges, railed and flagstoned, linking up the little grey stone cottages along the further bank.

Lilacs and laburnums hung drowsily across where the merry mayflies danced, where an occasional trout or two, so far escaped the wily poacher, lipped the surface, daintily fastidious. Minnows swarmed there. Vague memories still linger of white nets on bamboo poles, of lying in breathless suspense on flattened stomach, of glass jar near to hand becoming slowly fuller. Later the swifter and surer worm and bent pin. One pictures, too, the bored nursery-maid or tired governess; the dreaded: "Now, Master John, I'm not going to speak to you again! It's time you were coming in"; and just when things were at the most entrancing. Too troublesome for words! How one hated one's nurse at times!

Exactly how or by what means one evolved from the minnow and net-carrying stage I cannot clearly define. The river ran just outside the Vicarage grounds on the other side of the road. There was a very favourite bridge, with a couple of long, low arches, which you came upon just as you got outside the big double gates of the drive. It had white wooden posts at either end, through the tops of which ran a heavy iron rail, ideal for swinging on or dangling over to peer and look if one could glimpse a fish's tail.

Further up the stream, some eighty yards or so, was the Mill, a most intriguing affair when the big wheel, just visible through a chink in the wall, was

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going round. *Clump! Clump!* it went, and the water came simply tearing out. We used to call that the mill stream.

Just below the mill stream, and slightly drawn away into an angle from it, lay the Covet Hole. Why it was called the Covet Hole I have never yet discovered. Perhaps it was because there was a Mr. Cove who lived in one of the little cottages nearby, but I can't really say. It was just a little low stone arch covering the exit of a narrow tunnel, the means of overflow from the mill dam when the great wheel was not working. But at its mouth the continuous rush of water had gradually scooped out a goodly-sized hole, and here was the home of every kind of fish imaginable. I have caught trout and roach and perch there all in the same day, and once even a naughty old pike.

There was one memorable fish who lived there one year. He never came out into the pool for one to see, but by crawling carefully forward and craning one's neck it was possible to glimpse in the shadows under the arch the tip of a tail, a great, broad, black tail which would give an ironical flick and in a moment was gone.

How to get at him was a puzzle. My father tried all manner of means, and so in my small way did I. But the swift out-flow of the water made it impossible to get a worm up to him and he was a terribly scared and wily fish at that. Indeed, I fear the poachers must have worried him sadly.

My friend, the miller, knew him well. "Well nigh on five pun 'e be," was his dictum, and I felt sure he couldn't be very far wrong. He always professed the most complete ignorance of fish and fishing, but I have a vague and lingering suspicion that more fish

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from the Covet Hole passed through his jasmine-clustered doorway than ever entered the Vicarage portals at my expense.

Many times we discussed ways and means of getting at that mighty trout, but all he could do was to roll his disreputable bit of clay pipe from one side of his jowl to the other and spit forcibly into the flowing stream; a performance which I always regarded with wonder, how ever he managed to refrain from spitting his pipe at the same time into the water. "Dunno as there be any ways," he'd opine, "save wi' a stick o' dyn'mite"; which in the main, and in the interests of sport generally, was not exactly helpful.

It was my fertile brain which evolved the big idea, that of passing a worm on a long string down from the mill-dam end. It seemed full of possibilities. The chief difficulty lay in the means, till I remembered a salmon reel of my father's stuck away in the attic and a good stout line upon it. With this, a piece of stout gut, a fine large hook, and an equally fine large worm, I set hopefully forth.

My friend, the miller, was, as ever, very pleased to help. But all was not such plain sailing as I'd anticipated. First of all there was only a very small hole on the right side of the wooden hatchway, not more than three feet broad by a couple long, down which to drop the worm. Then again, after various futile attempts, I found the rod far too cumbersome. In the end I took the reel and line off the rod and dropping the worm in by hand, paid it out awhile, this time with complete success—and heart in mouth, attended results.

But nothing happened. No entrancing tug at the other end. Not so much as a tiny nibble. Just complete blank. I began to draw in the line, slowly,

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hand over hand. A yard—two yards—resistance! . . . A momentary thrill, and then depression. It was all too obvious I was securely hitched up—and some twenty yards of best salmon line, for the moment at any rate, as good as gone.

It was the miller's suggestion that we wound the rest of the line round a piece of wood and trust to it floating out the other end. All very well for him! He wasn't involved. I was—heartily so, and at first my nerve failed me. No one knew of the borrowed reel. Who could have suspected such dilemma? If I lost the whole line . . . ! But it seemed the only chance. I decided to risk it. But, I must confess, as that bit of stick, with goodness knows how much worth of line on it, disappeared into the blackness, it was not an entirely pleasant feeling I'd got way down inside of me.

So you can imagine the intensity of my delight, as we scrambled round to the other side, to find it calmly floating just clear of the Covet Hole, whilst beneath it in one big tangle was the remainder safely lying on the river bed.

And now comes the startling thrill of the story. For no sooner had my friend, the miller, at no small risk of swift and sudden immersion to himself, laid hold of the bit of stick and begun to haul in the tangled skein, than he dropped it like a hot brick. "Er be on, sir! 'Er be on!" he croaked in a hoarse and throaty whisper. "Catch un 'old!" Which, hardly daring to credit such luck, I did. Slowly and tremblingly I drew in the line. I'd got as far as the tangled bit, in fact was just beginning to wonder if my friend had not been dreaming, when there was a terrific tug at my hand. Next moment, the swirling flash of a great black body out into the pool, the

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wicked shake of a great dark head, the line taut like whipcord round my helpless fingers.—*Crack!* . . .

We heard later, how I know not—these rumours of poached fish only come in, when they do, by devious and back alleyways, but can generally be relied on as true—that it had been speared one early morning with a pitchfork, and that it weighed four and a half pounds. Would that I'd had that line on a rod instead of in the dead pull of my fingers. It might have been a very different ending. . . .

That small stretch of water was a never-ending source of amusement in my childish days. Summer holidays, when we did not spend them at the seaside, my young brother and I lived most of our days on it. Shoals of coarse fish—what we've always known as “white fish”—inhabited the mill run and the Covet Hole and all the village arches. Most of the trout, all the killable ones at least, had been caught and eaten long before holiday-time came round.

We used to fish with a piece of bamboo rod, a length of white cotton tied to the top, and a bent pin embedded in a ball of dough. Somehow one felt the fish got more of a sporting chance like this, and it was remarkable the fun we used to get out of them. Often they ran up to a pound in weight and, on this form of tackle, took some careful play to land.

It was here, one summer holidays, that I learnt to throw a fly. I managed the loan of an old rod of my father. It was a very old one indeed, and generally lived up in the attic in company with a strange and dusty conglomeration of assorted junk. I don't know whether it was the one he used when he was a boy, or his father before him. I think it must have been the latter, because it obviously came from a very dim and

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distant age, when the art of making fishing-rods was not very far advanced.

I remember it well. It must have been somewhere about twelve feet long, of greenheart, with a hefty great handle, and of a most fearful weight. Later, I broke its only top one day chastising a dog. Its existence thereafter disappeared into the shades of mystery.

But at that time it did the trick, for, by the use of a good deal of both hands, I gradually managed to present a fly to those kindly white fish—kindly, because they put up marvellously with the gigantic splashings I made, and every now and again nibbled the fly to their own undoing and my unbounded joy.

Innumerable are the years which have rolled by since then, and innumerable the fishing incidents forgotten, but it is remarkable how clear the memory of those youthful days still remains.

CHAPTER II

EARLY DAYS (*continued*)

SHOOTING is a very pleasurable pastime. With some it is a hobby, with others almost a business. But I suppose most people who go in for it hope one day to become moderately proficient. The point is how to become proficient? Upon what does expertness depend? On accuracy of aim, I've heard it said, in the first place, on speed of brain and body in the second, and on an infinity of practice in the third. Which, no doubt, is quite true. But I'd be inclined to reverse the order of numbers one and two.

From an aiming point of view, anybody, without any practice at all, should be able to hit a stationary target at extreme range five times out of every ten; every time with a little practice thrown in. But who, at first trial, will hit a moving target, however slow, even once in ten? That's the trouble—the complication of the unexpected, the varying range and speed and angle, the fractional space of time. A man may be the straightest shot in the world, and yet, unless he's able to combine it with quickness of brain and body, he's going to be nowhere with the shot-gun.

Which, incidentally, rather introduces the matter of shooting ahead. There are, of course, the two methods—the "follow through" and the "aim off." The expert will punk for the "follow through" and laugh to scorn the very bare idea of the other. And I

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feel he's right. Human frailty will always tend to error. To reduce error by process mechanical, if it can be done, is assuredly the soundest thing. All the same, being self-taught and having always aimed ahead, I was very glad one day when an expert of the "follow through" assured me that he really advocated the other school of thought. Be that as it may, I would for the benefit of the novice say this: If you have been brought up on the "follow through," consider yourself lucky and get on with it; but if you have not had that luck and are seriously embarked on the other, don't be persuaded—stick to it. You won't go far wrong.

This quickness of brain and hand is a very serious matter. Without it good shooting is impossible. Moreover, it must be automatic. Practice, and only unlimited practice, can do this. Practice with dummy cartridges is dull and monotonous at best; the expenditure of live rounds on clay birds one in which only the few can adequately indulge. It really is rather a problem how the ordinary man is going to start. If I might suggest it, the very ordinary air-gun isn't half a bad method. In my own case I am certain that any small ability I may have had lies entirely at its humble door. In my youthful days, out of school hours and when there was no fishing to be done, I positively lived with one in my hands. In the pleasantest possible of ways, all the time I was, unbeknownst to myself, slowly working up to the mechanical speed of hand and eye, body and brain. It made all the difference on the day when I came to use a shot-gun for the first time.

I remember the first air-gun I owned was a "Daisy," and I couldn't have been more than eight or nine at the time. It shot a round pellet, which seemed to sail forth in a most leisurely and peaceful manner from an

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enormously fat and podgy barrel. But it was remarkable the number of unfortunate sparrows that went to swell my youthful bag at its expense.

Later on, when I reached the age of ten, I was given a more powerful gun, a beautiful affair with a silver-plated barrel and fittings and which fired a proper slug. My young brother—a year or so my junior and one day to meet a sad but gallant end with the New Zealand Mounted Rifles on the Gallipoli peninsula—was given another of a different pattern, as hard a hitter but never, in my eyes, so splendid a one as that silver-plated gun of mine.

From that day onwards during holiday time the birds had to look pretty slippy in the Vicarage garden. Likewise any stray cats or dogs which should be unwise enough to cross our path. Our chief sport was the sparrows homing away among the tall laurels and the arborvitae hedges on winter evenings. Crouched in the shelter of a tree-trunk or a convenient wall, trying to think that one wasn't really so cold as one felt, it was fine the shooting we got at those gay, noisy sparrows as they came streaming in, perched a moment on topmost twig before seeking the shelter of the leaves, a wonderful mark against a glowing sky.

The kitchen cat, a weather-worn tabby and mother of incessant broods, took very kindly to us in this connection. She was our constant and most devoted companion. The first bang of a gun and there she was. How she discovered the art of it I never could say. By some queer intuition she learnt to post herself at the foot of the tree or hedge into which we were shooting, a quiet, still shadow in the dark of the under-growth. A bird, hit, would literally fall plumb in her open mouth, and was quickly eaten on the spot. It added a zest to our sport and gave a smug satisfac-

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tion that it was for the pot we were shooting and not only the pure love of destruction.

On one or two points my father and mother were very insistent. One was that certain birds were taboo—thrushes, blackbirds, robins, etc. I remember many a time watching the two former with a covetous eye, their big, fat bodies fairly asking for a pellet. They ate up so many strawberries, too. It seemed really rather stupid. Now, in my older years, I see the point. Who wouldn't give a whole host of strawberries for that full-throated song which greets us with early dawn, which comes throbbing down to us from the top of some tall tree, as the soft shadows begin to creep slowly towards us across the lawn?

Another dictum was that we should strictly refrain from shooting at the persons either of ourselves or our smaller brethren; for we were a terribly large family. They didn't go so far as to include the gardener, so I suppose that was all right. I caught him one day in the process of planting potatoes. There was a good thick quickset hedge most of the way, and down this I solemnly stalked him, silently along the grassy borders of the path, till unperceived I drew within some fifty feet or so of his stooped and unsuspecting person.

I think the seat of his trousers must have been strained to the maximum of their stretching point when my pellet took him. There was the sharp ping as of a drum struck hard, a loud and agonising yell; and in that moment my elation was swiftly replaced by sharp and sudden consternation. Without thinking I turned and fled, my one-time pal the gardener hard after me, and vowing the direst and sternest of reprisals when he caught me. It was a critical situation. My word, how I ran! Fortunately I have ever been fleet of foot.

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It stood me in stead that day, else assuredly I must have sadly rueed my daring. I slammed the garden door and slipped the key—only just in the nick of time. The wall was high and saved me.

It was only after a lapse of days, and the mediation of a packet of sticky sweets, that I felt I might resume the old liberties to which I was accustomed with my whilom friend and sometime ally, George Skeuse—head gardener, coachman and universal factotum to the Vicarage in general.

Though, even now, I'm not sure whether he didn't really get the better of me, after all—purposely or otherwise; for only a few days afterwards he allowed me to take a draw at his pipe, a privilege demanded for years without avail, and which, therefore, lends to suspicion. For, after a second and more violent suck at it, I must have dislodged a particularly luscious nicotined morsel of honest shag. Whereat I was violently and ignominiously sick.

With continual usage one's skill with the air-gun became quite remarkable. The number of pellets expended must have been prodigious. It was always my big ambition to take a bird on the wing. Swallows provided the most excellent target practice, but I am glad to say now, though misses were frequently fractional, my efforts with these graceful visitors of ours never met with success.

But it did teach one to shoot with both eyes open, because by that means you could watch the trajectory of the shot and thereby correct your aim, and that is a very big asset in shooting. But though a swallow never fell to my gun, I did, however, one red-letter evening, hit a flitting bat, with two consecutive shots moreover, the first time in the wing, for I found the bullet-hole afterwards, the second time stone dead. A bit of an

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accident, I fear, for I never accomplished the deed again, though it was not from lack of trying.

The stable yard holds always very tender memories for me. For many years George Skeuse reigned there supreme. How well I remember him, in his blue liveried coat and white breeches, his sleek top hat, with its gay little cockade, stationed there at the horses' heads as we scrambled into the back of the smart, navy-blue wagonette, breathless for fear they would start before we were seated; his squat figure perched on the livery-box at my father's side. Oh, yes, a dapper turn-out we were, and very proud of it I do assure you.

But the best days were those when my father and mother drove away in the little brown dog-cart all alone by themselves; when they left those two brave fellows, George and his satellite, Barnes, to yawn at ease against the saddle-room door. What times we had! What games of football and hockey! Little could that couple in the dog-cart have wotted of the wickednesses going on behind their devoted backs, the awful wasted hours. Little then did we realise our own unrighteous share in it.

But there were days when all was not so well, days when, wheedle as we would, the backs of those two worthies would adhere themselves to the warm, snug walls with the persistence and undetachableness of the genus clam. It was thus that one got to know of a strange and mystifying complaint called "bone-in-the-leg." I remember one would say: "It's no use trying to get George to play to-day. He's got bone-in-the-leg." Or George himself—"No, zur! Bain't no good axin' to-day. Got a bone in me leg," and he'd follow it up with a highly realistic demonstration of excessive lameness. It was really most annoying. But I must

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confess that the remarkable suddenness with which this affliction would come on was apt to make one just a trifle sceptical at times.

It was here, too, that one would frequently be a highly edified witness of one of the rural pleasantries as practised by the said George. It consisted of catching one of the maids, who often as not came to watch, and even sometimes take part in, our illicit revels, and putting them through a form of third degree—a process of rubbing their faces up and down against his blue and bristly chin, and productive of a great deal of shrieks and gigglings. It was the greatest fun, and caused us children unbounded satisfaction. In fact, I fear we were, as often as not, the prime instigators of this harmless and highly amusing recreation.

Besides the air-gun, the air-pistol made a pleasant variation. My brother and I each had one. They had a long spring attaching round the barrel, which latter one pressed in and inserted a slug at the base. They went off with a cheerful, whirring noise, but beyond a range of a few yards or so had no very great hitting power.

We used to have great duels, under varying conditions. We never regarded the pistol in the same category as the gun, though one realises now it was just about doubly dangerous. But we fortunately made it a point of honour not to aim above the knee-cap. Just as well! I bear in mind well, even now, how these pellets on the shin-bone could sting.

Only once have I recollection of hitting a bird, and that was a big fat thrush; and remembering the mandates of my parents, no doubt I shouldn't have done it. But the dear thing came into view so suddenly, sitting there all smug and self-satisfied on the hedge just behind a large tree. It just had to have

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it and it did—right in the pit of its plump stomach. Maybe it was surprise, or maybe it was that it was just winded, but it dropped on the other side of the hedge like a stone. By the time we'd found a gap and had plunged round the other side he'd obviously slipped away, for there was not a sign to be found of him anywhere whatsoever. Which, though disappointing, was, no doubt, just as well.

Rabbit-shooting was the first occasion on which I had occasion to handle a shot-gun. These first moments are trying enough for any tyro, I should imagine. I know my own feelings were sufficiently mixed, a certain amount of proud elation sprinkled pretty thick with sheer funk—fear lest one made too much of a fool of oneself, to some extent honest funk of the very gun itself. It seemed such a terribly big affair in comparison with my meagre air-gun, and those stupendous cartridges, after the insignificant pellet, so full of alarming possibilities. Rather futile it may seem to any lad brought up in a shooting family, but to one who has never previously come in contact with the real thing there is some small excuse.

However, things went off very fairly successfully on the whole, considerably more so than on a very regrettable second venture. On that occasion it was, I remember, a wet, dull November day. It had been almost a complete blank. The rabbits were few and far between and simply wouldn't bolt. We seemed to spend the whole day digging, and the ones we did get met their ends through the ferrets and by no skill of ours.

We ended up with a beat through a narrow strip of copse, thick with rank grass and undergrowth. I was posted so as to watch a narrow ride, whilst the kindly squire went off to direct the beaters.

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Would that he had reversed our roles. It was a truly most regrettable incident. Of a sudden the world seemed full of rabbits. They came popping over in a positive stream, and my gun going off like a quick-firer. But that narrow drive—it couldn't have been more than four feet across at very most! It had me beat, sheer snapshooting in its acutest form, just a hundred per cent too acute for me. I blazed off every cartridge I'd got, but with as much hope of hitting those infernal little streaks of grey and white as of swallowing the gun whole: an undertaking to which I'd have willingly consented, far more willingly, indeed, than face the on-coming beat with my small pile of empties and my large score of misses.

We made up for it a few days later. Things were very different. There'd been a nice snap of frost and the rabbits had been bolting fine. I was feeling happier, too. I'd not disgraced myself so badly this time. Hedgerow shooting at its best is really comparative child's play, even for a beginner.

It was getting on towards sundown and we were beginning to think of packing up, when just over our heads a flight of pigeons went swooping by. Now, watching the direction of their flight, our gaze fell upon a distant wood darkly silhouetted against the sky-line, a very celebrated fox covert, but now, by gad! every tree-top positively stiff with pigeon. There was no mistaking it.

We'd got only a couple of dozen cartridges left apiece, but it was too good a chance to miss, and away we went as hard as we could leg it. It took twenty minutes' hard walking, but there was still sufficient light, and it was well worth it. Never since have I seen such a mass of pigeon. They positively swarmed. There were simply hundreds of them. The ground

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everywhere was white with their feathers and droppings.

In single file we crept along the spinney side, and as we went pigeons rose in clouds around us. I was too young to it. There came a moment when I simply could restrain myself no longer. Half a dozen birds came sailing complacently only a few feet above my head. I just had to have a crack at them. Utterly mad, of course, till safely tucked away behind some cover of sorts, and, to make matters worse, in my excitement I put up a couple of first-class misses.

However, I had the luck to get away with it that time. In all probability there were such masses of pigeons there that an odd shot or two did not make any great odds. For one terrific moment the air was dark with whirring forms, then they settled again. Cautiously we withdrew from the ditch into which we had hurled ourselves—and I can tell you I'd had a pretty good cursing as I lay there—and pushed off to our separate points.

Never shall I forget that shoot. Never again shall I have so much to shoot at. I could have let off six times the number of cartridges I had with me. I was simply covered with droppings when I emerged—so were both of us, for that matter. Between us we'd collected a dozen and a half birds.

I've always thought that, as an intricate and exhilarating form of sport, pigeon shooting on the evening flight takes a lot of beating. And apart from the nicety of shooting in between the interlacing tree-tops, there's a lot of nicety, too, required in choice of stand. No small knowledge of the bird and his habits is required. That's what brings in the bag. You don't necessarily want to be under his very perch and blow him incontinently up; but, at the same

Great Days

time, it's a poor and tantalising evening's amusement watching a series of fine shots passing away to a flank, where a little knowledge of shooting lore would have quite easily rectified matters and brought the birds within comfortable range.

I went up to the old haunt several times after that, but never again met with that remarkable swarm of birds. Where they went, or how they happened there on that first occasion, I have no idea. They are a transitory kind of bird at best. One evening alone remains in my memory. Six birds came my way, all fine, towering shots through my tiny patch of sky amid the tall branches. Six plump birds swelled the Vicarage larder that night. They were lucky shots, no doubt, but they were not flukes. I only mention the occasion because it was the first year I'd used a gun, and I hope it may go towards backing up my main contention, that there really is a great deal to be said for the old air-gun.

CHAPTER III

ADOLESCENCE

THE village of Ashton Keynes is as picturesque and charming a little spot as is very well possible to find. It is situated just inside the northern boundaries of Wiltshire, and some are in doubt, I believe, on which side it really is. But if you proceed from it along the main road towards Cirencester—or Cisiter, as we always pronounce it—after going along for some two miles you come to a hill, quite a little one, and though you'd hardly believe it, the only one for miles around. It just shows you how flat it is round us.

But if you continue on up, and go on down again on the other side, you come to a tiny streamlet, which you pass over by an almost imperceptible bridge. And that bridge, though you'd not know it unless you were told, is the boundary between Wiltshire and Gloucestershire. As children we always experienced a tremendous thrill as we passed the boundary-line, because we were quite certain that we could feel the bump.

The village itself lies at the very source of the River Thames. And it really is the Thames, though there are some who seek to establish that it is not, and that the Thames proper rises at a place called Seven Springs. Which is not true, because it doesn't. It rises close to a small village called Kemble, which a glance at any reliable map will go to prove; and after

Great Days

meandering peacefully through a mile or so of pleasant pasture and meadow land, arrives as a fairly substantial stream down along the main highway of the village of Ashton Keynes, and flows gently on thence towards the old country town of Cricklade.

Apart from the main road, which really hasn't any name at all, the village bears some quaint ones to its other streets. There's Gosditch and the Derry, and then there's Water Hay and Happy Land, queer names and quite meaningless, for they really mean nothing at all as far as I can gather; but household words in one's memory, linking up in a pleasant intimacy the days of the present with those of one's infancy.

The village itself has substantially altered but little since I have known it—an odd Council cottage or two run up; a garage, with its not very sightly petrol pumps, where the picturesque old forge used to be; here and there an odd cottage condemned and pulled down; little else. A pleasant clinging to the old-time world of our fathers in these swiftly moving days of an ever-changing country-side, these mushroom growths of towns, these ever-multiplying lanes of red-bricked villarettes.

How pleasant it is to lean against the same old rails one leant against as a boy, to gaze down upon the same gay swarms of minnows one used to watch with anxious eyes, and fish for with such untiring zeal, and find that so little has changed. To hear the same old Wiltshire tongue—"Well, well, Maister John, an' 'ow 'e 'ave growed! Thuck be a fine girt wurm—let oi stick un on fur 'e," changing a little in tune in course of time—"Marnin', zur! Main glad to see 'e again. Bin 'aving much sport, zur? River be main dry this zeason. Ah! Baint the fish in 'er

Adolescence

there usun to be. Don't reckon 'aving zeen a trout in the village this year." The old villain! Bet he's had a few! And not so much as a twinkle of an eye to embellish this fabrication of one of the wickedest old poachers in all the country-side.

Past the Mill and by a narrow pathway, close up against where the big wheel used to go *clump! clump!* (for it is still now, and for many years fallen into disuse), you come at the end of it to a time-worn and now rather rickety old gate. A kissing-gate it is called, and you probably know the reason why. But in case you don't, it's because there used to be a rustic custom, and maybe still is, that a man meeting a maid at one of these gates might demand a kiss as toll—and get it apparently—before permitting her to pass on her way.

I fear I am unable to back this statement from personal experience, and no doubt I am the loser. I really don't know how it is, because I should hardly like to hazard the number of times I have passed through these gates. Perhaps it is because it has never been my fortune to meet a maid at the critical moment. Or perhaps it may have been just sheer timidity. Or maybe it was not the right type of maiden after all.

Be that as it may, having left the kissing-gate behind, you find yourself in the Mill Field, a fine big meadow down the side of which runs the mill-dam, a deep and peaceful sweep of water overhung all the way down the further bank by a narrow copse of nut and elm and willow. It used to be simply full of fish, and I well remember my father one day spreading out on the lawn, for our admiring edification, three brace of trout, all within the region of two to three pounds, and all taken in one short afternoon from this single bit of water.

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At the top of it you came to another kissing-gate, and so on over the road and into another field. But you must stop a moment here and have a look, for this is the Sheep-wash, the famous bridge where that walloping big fish lay, where my infant fingers wouldn't let the tugging line run. And it's called the Sheep-wash because at the back of it, where it runs deep, is a sort of little pen, into which from one end the sheep are shoved and, after a good pummelling with what look rather like great rakes, come climbing dripping out of the other. I used to feel terribly sorry for those sheep: they looked so bedraggled and miserable. "Doees 'em a power o' good!" was about all the sympathy I'd get out of the busy farm hands, and I had, perforce, to believe them and hope it really was so. But I used to get terribly angry with the nurses when they laughed and thought it the greatest fun. I felt it was really very unkind of them.

But now on up-stream you go, through a rich meadow of gay young grass, full to overflowing with daisies and buttercups, cowslips and quaker-grass, and every kind of wild flower imaginable, and then you come to a little wicket-gate. And now you must pause, for you have arrived at the Flood Hatch, and this is a very wonderful and very important place indeed. For at this point a slender stream breaks gently off and, falling in brave cascade beneath a pair of heavy oaken hatches, flows swiftly into a tree-girt pool; and having gently swirled awhile flows softly on and out into the bright sunlight, bearing away in winter-time the flood-waters which threaten the over-charged banks of the mill-dam.

Now, leaning against the spiky trellis-work which fringes this little rustic bridge, you may drop a mayfly into the flow of the stream beneath and, marking its

Adolescence

slow and stately progress, see it reach the opening depths of the great pool, riding bravely—a sudden low *plomp!*—and it is gone! . . . And that, as likely as not, will be a mighty trout.

It is a wonderful place and full of memories for me, this great pool. It is where, I regret to relate, I was the very willing accomplice in as wicked a piece of poaching as very well could be. A favourite uncle was staying with us. One hot and sultry evening we betook ourselves for a walk together up the river, and in coming to the pool we made acquaintance with a village worthy, apparently on similar errand bent. At least, so I remember gathering from his reply to my uncle's affable greeting, though, actually at the time of meeting, he was sprawled on the pit of his stomach, peering with obvious interest into the depths of the pool beneath.

Now, joining him in this pleasant meditation, it was a charming prospect to watch how half a dozen goodly trout disported themselves leisurely at the bottom of the pool. Also a fair-sized pike. And, as we lay thus upon our stomachs, I remember presently a conversation somewhat on the following lines:

My uncle (puffing away at his pipe): "Fine pike that, eh, George?"

V.W. (village worthy): "Ay', zur—that 'er be!"

My uncle (after a pause): "Five or six pounds, I should say, what?"

V.W.: "Reckon 'er be, zur—reckon 'er be . . . but bain't fur me to say. Knows naught about fishing—though 'er do look the likes on it."

My uncle (ruminatively): "Hum! Pity we couldn't get him out. . . . I say—suppose you can't do anything in that line?"

V.W. (with vehemence, and beginning to get to his

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feet): "No, zur, no! Oi bain't no fisherman!" And it was all too plain he was making rapid preparations for an early and hurried departure. In fact he was as good as gone.

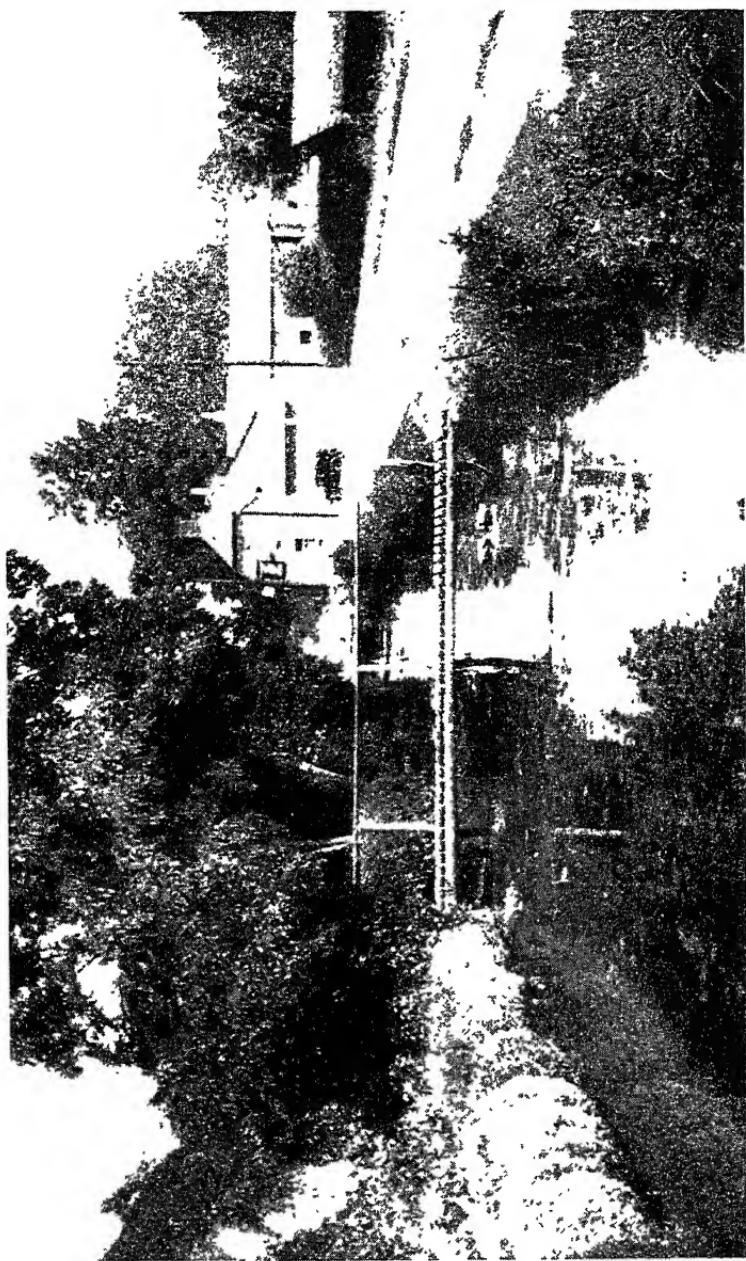
Now, I'm rather hazy as to what exactly followed next. But it came to me that something with the glint of silver about it seemed to pass from my uncle's palm into that of the village worthy. Indeed, I think it really must have been so, else what should account for the sudden and speedy change wrought miraculously in our previously reluctant friend?

For, hardly had one time to count to twenty before there had been produced a fine length of wire out of nowhere, before it had been twisted deftly round a long pole (which, strangely enough, appeared equally miraculously out of nowhere), and in a moment, lo and behold! there was that fine pike lying kicking on the grass at our feet.

It was really a very fine bit of work and tremendously thrilling. But I don't think my father was quite so approving on hearing the incident narrated as I in witnessing it done; though I own I was careful to avoid all mention of my own complicity; and my uncle, being the thorough sportsman he was, was very careful not to give me away.

At the somewhat tender age of seventeen I left Marlborough College, somewhat precipitately it would seem, there being still three weeks to the end of the Christmas term. In fact there were some, I fear, who, in a not very true spirit of Christian kindness, concluded I'd been sacked. But that was not so. I had, as the saying is, gone to the wars.

In those days there were two means of entry into the Army—one, by the front door, Sandhurst or Woolwich; the other, by the back door, the Militia.



Ashton Keynes

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Up till about this time my accepted destined vocation had always been the Church. My father's living was in his own gift and I the eldest son. That I should follow in his footsteps seemed to have been taken as the very plausible and natural sequence.

Nor, till then, had the impression—whether indeed one had considered it seriously or not, which on looking back on it I think doubtful—seemed distasteful. To one's youthful vision a parson's life appeared a pretty good thing regarded as a whole, with a great deal of leisure time and an abundance of first-class fishing thrown in.

So it was really not till about this time that I began to consider my future at all seriously; and, considering it, could not for the life of me picture myself doing the things I discovered a parson had to do—sermons, mothers' meetings, funerals, visiting elderly sick, and a host of other wonderful and altogether terrifying things. I felt it simply could not be done.

I must say my father took the blow, for a blow it most undoubtedly must have been, with a kindly and sympathetic fortitude. The Army seemed the only thing left to do, the back way in the only means of entrance. The South African War was in its dying throes, but still petering on. There was yet a chance that way, where free commissions were sometimes to be had for the asking. On the very day that the school broke up, at the absurd age of just seventeen, I sailed for the war, a full-blown Second Lieutenant in the 5th (Militia) Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. Indeed, so little was I experienced in matters military, not having been a member of the Cadet Corps (as it was then known), that, shortly after landing, being placed in command of a body of men, and having got as far as "*Form Fours!*" (of which

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order I had vague preparatory-school recollections), found myself woefully stuck, and had, perforce, to fall back upon a rather miserable "*Come on!*" if we were ever going to move at all. Still, it seemed to have the desired effect, and we marched away quite merrily. In fact, I'm not so sure that my retinue of hardened toughs didn't take all the more kindly to their youthful leader for it.

But my venture failed miserably to secure the desired Regular Commission. There remained the Militia Competitive Exam. as a last resort, and so, on return to England, I adjourned post-haste to an Army crammer. Cramming is not a greatly-to-be-recommended form of education, but a very pleasant help in time of emergency. It was a dull, monotonous and rather sordid period. We lived in a sparsely furnished, uncomfortable, large, red-bricked house. It seems, in retrospect, a vague conglomeration of excessively hard work, a small admixture of golf and hockey, and a very considerable amount of tobacco smoke. There were some half-dozen of us, all very young and unsophisticated, but of these, my fellow-students, only one remains at all clear in my memory. He was rather a rotund kind of fellow, but he was intriguingly keen on the matter of straight-grained pipes, and that, I think, was the real basis of our friendship. I should not dare to say the amount of money we expended in that line, nor the number of blends of tobacco we essayed in that truly agreeable and highly masculine occupation. There were occasions when we were very nearly sick, but, taken as a whole, we gained much satisfaction out of it.

What drew me most, perhaps, was the most extraordinary shine my friend was able to get on his pipes. He was most secretive and rather unnecessarily

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important, it seemed to me, about it. It made me all the more determined to wrest his secret from him. But it was not till some time later, and then only as a result of a considerable number of small beers in a neighbouring and not very high-class bar, that, in a sudden flow of emotion, he confided to me how it was done.

And I fear I suffered from mild disappointment at so simple an affair, for it consisted merely in an occasional application of the pipe, when pleasantly warm, to the side of the nostrils, followed by a rapid frictioning against the trouser seat or a well-stretched trouser leg. However, I have no doubt the resultant burnish I achieved thereafter in my own pipes had its own consolation.

I might perhaps mention one regrettable failing I recall in my friend, and I don't know if it can be attributed to his lapse in the direction of rotundity, but there's no doubt he was particularly favoured with a somewhat excessive flow of saliva. For, as we sat at ease round our workroom fire there would emanate from his pipe a low bubbling sound, highly comforting, no doubt, to the smoker but not so eminently satisfactory to those around him; which sometimes increasing to a pitch beyond even our youthful endurance, we would arise in our wrath and eject him summarily, pipe and all, into the cold and comfortless regions of the back passageway.

That four months of strenuous labour brought its own reward, for, with ninety-nine others, and bottom but one amongst the lot of them, I slipped successfully through the back entrance and into the Army. I don't know whether I was surprised or not, but I'm pretty confident my father was; and, in recognition of so remarkable a feat, presented me with a brand-new

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fishing outfit, which included a beautiful greenheart fly-rod. For, not being due to join my regiment, the Sixteenth Foot, till early in July, I found myself with May and June ahead of me, the two most glorious months for fishing in the whole year. And so I set to with a will, and by the time the mayfly had come along was beginning to throw a very fairly proficient fly.

The Flood Hatch pool, apart from its normal good stock of fish, held one particularly fine trout that year. Indeed, rumour had it that he would turn the scale at seven pounds at least. But, like all big fish, he was most remarkably shy, and, though I lay in wait for him on many a likely day, it was not till the mayfly season opened in earnest that I saw him at length for the first time.

That evening, as usual, we were fishing the Copse, a beautiful half-mile stretch of gravelly water, bordered by a narrow pathway, and which you come upon after passing across the little Flood Hatch bridge. And you've got to be terribly careful here how you throw your fly, because just behind you there's a high may hedge and on the further bank a maze of leafy boughs and drooping stems; and, worse still, in between an intricate weaving of young and wicked weed. A grand place to learn, because it teaches you to throw a careful and cunning fly.

Oh dear! How angry I used to get, and what profanity of words I used! How well I remember, one sunny day, going up to see that all was well with a couple of visitors to our water, and what a pathetic picture I found! Two disconsolate and sadly watching figures, a quantity of rising trout, and not a fly to be thrown among them. It turned out they were more or less beginners, accustomed only to pleasant open banks with comfortable meadowland behind; and

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having lost a couple of dozen flies and a cast or two had just given it up.

But this particular evening was a lovely balmy evening towards the end of May, and the finest hatch we'd had so far had just come on. The water was simply thick with fly. I'd been somewhat delayed in the Mill Field, and by the time I reached the Flood Hatch my father was well on and out of sight, and I can only surmise that when he crossed the bridge that great trout had not yet come out to feed; else, knowing him (my father, I mean), I cannot picture him passing by.

For there, in the shady front of the pool, lay a great trout, and ever and anon he would come a moment, slowly and untroubled, to the surface, a tiny, almost imperceptible, break in the stream, and as slowly would sink back again. Quite easy it was to make out the faint white outline of his great square mouth as he lay there in all his fishy glory.

I can tell you my heart was beating like a sledge-hammer then. If only, unseen, I could get just one fly over him, what hopes, what a chance of a lifetime! And a moment later I'd done it . . . and, by gad, yes!—it had passed him unheeded by. That *did* seem incredible! Yet so it was and so it went on. I cast again and again. I changed my fly a dozen times, but it was no use. He was an absolute brute, that trout! Would that, like my father, I, too, had passed by and never seen him.

The whole of that precious evening I spent monkeying about after that wicked fish; and when at length the impudent brute had had his fill and, with a disdainful wag of his big tail, had turned and disappeared unruffled and replete into the comfortable fastnesses of the great pool; and when at last I bent my sorrowing footsteps in my father's wake, it was but to meet him

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cheerfully returning with laden bag, and that great hatch well over.

The river had a splendid head of trout in it that year. Old Jesse Bartlett, I think it must have been, who was the keeper. And I'd have liked you to have met Jesse—a real character, typical Wiltshireman, short, stocky, broad as he was long, with the face and features of a prize-fighter. Gossip had it that he'd been an out-and-out poacher: but gossip always likes to have unkindly digs. Maybe it was right, but that doesn't affect the character of a man. Your true poacher may be a transgressor of the law, but at heart he's as good a sportsman as ever you are.

Thanks, no doubt, to Jesse Bartlett, the Copse was full of fish. Mayfly, too, in their myriads. And what a paradise in which to fish! Even at times when the hatch was done and the trout retired to digest and think upon their next merry meal, what a marvellous place to sit and smoke a pipe, and ponder awhile and wait for another hatch to come on again.

How clear in one's memory it all remains; the dear old stream gliding softly along in its shadowy bed of green, the dark overhang of the trees, the flickering glint where here and there the sun breaks through; the tall and drooping grasses down the bank, the strong, sweet scent of thyme and may, the merry dance of mayflies, lately hatched, rising and falling in dainty cadence beneath the sweep of the tall hedgerow. And away in the distance the call of the cuckoo mingling with the chorus of a multitude of birds, the faint lowing of cattle from the meadow across the water. How one always loved the dear cuckoo, but how angry one used to get when he began to be silly and do his stupid little giggle. How one used positively to hate him sometimes!

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I don't know how many good fish, from a pound to close on three, we didn't kill between us that spring. What sport they gave, those wonderful wild fish of the Thames. No imported fellows these. Lightning strips of leaping quicksilver when the hook had struck well home. And the flesh of them, pink as a salmon's—and the eating! Never in all my life have I tasted anything to equal it.

I remember a later evening, some few days after the mayfly had come and gone, I was fishing the lower reaches of the little Flood Hatch stream. A tiny stream, indeed, for in places it was only a yard or two across. We used to call it Millards then, because the farmer who rented it was so named. We still do, even now, though the great estate to which it belonged has years since been sold up and passed into other hands. But I had heard tell of heavy fish that way, for it linked up a stretch of deep water known as the Swill brook, where Sou'moor lies, and up which the big fish come in flood time, and it was worth inquiring into.

I'd come, at length, to the very selfsame spot where my father and I had caught that momentous trout on the the sadly broken rod. A wonderful holt for big fish then, a wonderful holt still; for here the stream, flowing swiftly over a patch of golden gravel, plunged sharply and at a curve beneath the deep fastnesses of a mighty elm. And just in front of it, scarce half a dozen yards from bank to bank, a merry shoal of minnows made a dark and lively patch against the yellow of the gravel.

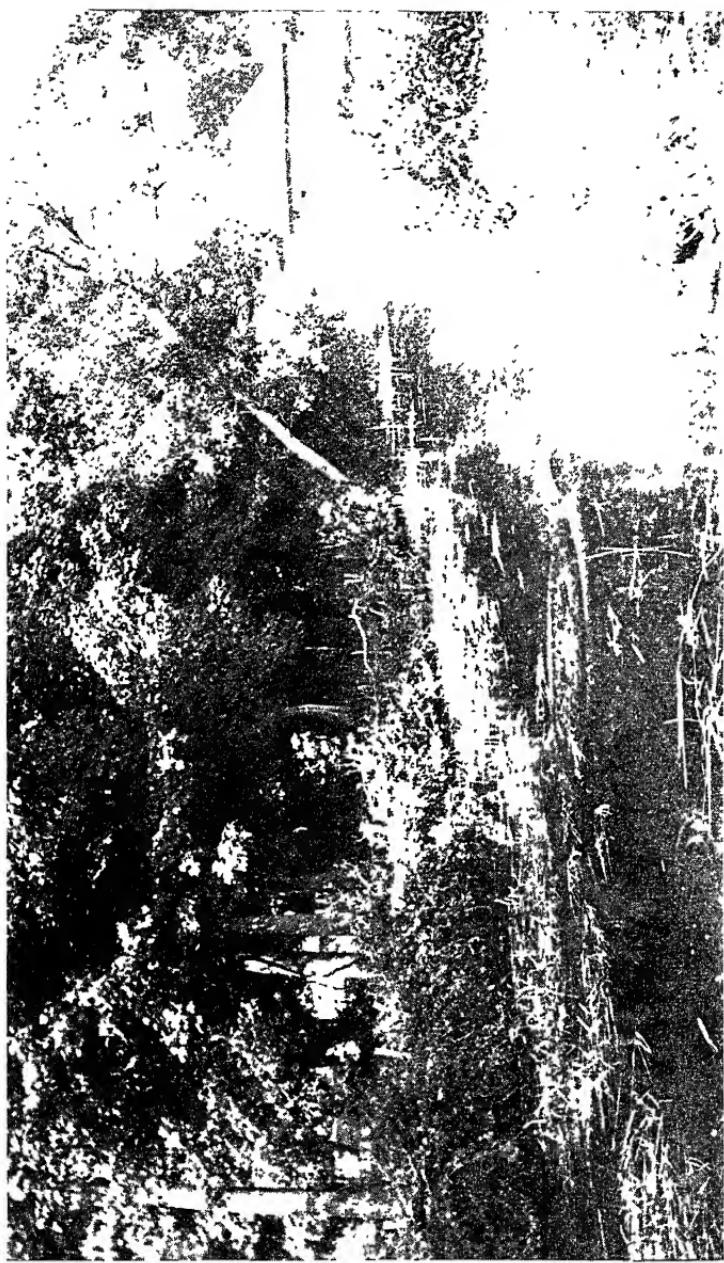
Now these minnows, at this time of year, are beautifully coloured when you get them out, of a deeply burnished green and red. My favourite hero of romantic fiction, John Ridd, tells of "catching a minnow in a stickle with the scarlet fingers upon him," and I have often wondered if this is what he meant. But,

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watching from a little distance, it seemed to me from time to time that there was a sharp and strange commotion among this lively batch of minnows, as of a mighty cleaving shadow which was not of their making. And stooping closer, it was suddenly borne in upon me that these same dark shadows were none other than enormous trout—three of them, as near as I could make out, and feeding rapaciously among the spawning minnows.

Slowly and steadily, scarce able to believe my eyes, I drew myself back, and set to ponder what was best to be done about it: for I reckoned that not one of those fish was less than five pounds, and so in a quiver of excitement I tried my cast, and it was $2\times$ and of the stoutest. Then, duly satisfied on this point, I caught a good-sized minnow, and having secured it, fresh and kicking, on a hook as big as I dared use, stealthily down I crept behind the bush just on the other side of where those great trout were feeding, and lowered it gently in. And so close was I that the tip of my rod could hardly have been a full length from their very noses.

Almost at once I was in to one of them, and the only thing I can liken it to was striking into a large and heavy log of wood. And, as I struck, from behind the bush came the sound of a heavy commotion, a noise among the shallows as of a great duck splashing. Down went my rod, bent like a storm-stricken aspen! Crash went that fish away! But, remembering all too well the tangling mass of roots and brier for which that dark torpedo form was making, I hung desperately on, knowing my meagre chances should he once succeed in reaching them. But the scales were too unevenly weighted. On so short a line the strain was more than it could stand. Nothing short of a rope could have



*The Mill Field—
Ashton Keynes*

Adolescence

done it. For one dazzling moment my gallant rod positively buckled in my hand . . . then *crash!* . . . and that great fish was gone . . . !

Ah, me! It was really too distressing! At crack of dawn I was down again next day, with worm and stoutest tackle. But there was nothing doing, and hay-making had begun. I never saw those fish again. It needed but little imagination to hazard pretty shrewdly where they went . . . but there the story ends!

But there was another beautiful trout which came my way. I met him earlier on one balmy day, when the air was full of hay-seed and the green drake changing to the grey. It was down at the lower end of the river, known as Brown's, where just below there lie a couple of fields called the Charity Land. It was Church property, and in those days my father, as Vicar of the Parish, used to have the rights of fishing it. It was a stretch of slow and deep and very sluggish water, so full of weed and lily stem as to be well nigh unfishable, and mainly the home of pike and coarse fish.

But at the furthest end, just where the boundary hedge came slanting down to the water edge, the river took a sharp and sudden bend, and here beneath the bank lay a deep and narrow lily-girt pool. Now, wandering down there on the off chance of spying a good trout rising (for if one did live there you could be pretty sure he was a big 'un) and finding none, I spread myself at ease on the soft, warm bank and started to get on with my luncheon. And having eaten it, set to light my pipe, and drowse, and watch the mayflies dancing.

And as I lay there, lazily puffing, yet keeping all the time a careful eye upon that glassy pool, suddenly there seemed to me to come a tiny break in the surface of the stream just beneath where the riot of blackthorn

Great Days

hung. It had all the appearance of a rise, and yet it might be just as well a minnow leaping. But as I looked with greater attention another came, a slow, soft *sup!* the unmistakable rise of a good fish, hard in under the shelving bank.

Wishing to make quite certain of exactly where he was lying, I paused awhile. And, waiting thus, presently a lovely fly came settling itself upon the water and drifted slowly, almost as if one guided it thus oneself, down towards the debatable spot . . . nearer—nearer . . . for one moment I feared it had passed, and then suddenly a gentle break in the surface and it had gone—and I'd got my trout marked down to a tee.

My first fly lodged on top of a lily leaf three feet away to a flank, and for a moment I thought I was done. But it came away and I cast again, fearful lest I'd put my wily friend down for all time. For a terrible moment I feared the worst, and then again there came that tiny break in the surface, and my fly had gone. Next second my reel was going screeching out and I was hard into him.

Now that was one of the finest and most sporting fish I've been into. The first thing he did was to make three great splashing leaps into the air, and with those low-hanging branches close down to the water edge I promise you I fairly had my heart in my mouth. But the line held clear and then he made a straight dive for the deep of the pool at my very feet; and here was trouble enough and to spare, for the bank was overhung and steep, and a veritable maze of muck and weed lay there. It was a critical moment. I had to give him the butt or he'd have been into it and gone in a minute. Whether I applied it too hard or what, there was a sudden *crack*, my line went slack, and there was the top of my rod clean gone.

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It might have seemed that my fish had gone with it; but no—when I came to draw in there he was, still on, and now swimming slowly in circles in the deep of the pool, the tip of the broken rod-top glued apparently to the end of his flat nose.

I netted him and swung him ashore fairly soon after that, but when I came to disengage the fly I found it fast in the endmost ring of the broken top. Truly luck's a fickle jade! But that beautiful trout scaled exactly two and threequarter pounds, and was my biggest fish yet.

CHAPTER IV

BORDON

I JOINED my regiment early in July, 1903, then stationed in Colchester. But very soon afterwards moved with it to Bordon, a pleasantly picturesque, though somewhat out-of-the-way locality in the Hampshire pine and heather land. The camp itself is a relic of the Boer War. It began life as a temporary encampment but, in place of being dismantled, took upon itself the glorified status of a permanent military station. You pass it on your way along the London-Portsmouth road, and if you happen to look you will note how upstanding brick barracks are beginning now to mingle with the otherwise interminable line upon line of grey tin huts.

But in those days it was all tin huts and nothing else—corrugated iron, match-boarding, nails and draught. Our quarters comprised a sixth part of one of them, and mighty close quarters they were too. There was a coal stove in each, which, with its black iron pipe going straight up through the roof, seemed to take up half the available space at least. On cold winter evenings it was pleasant enough, and for that one forgave it much, but when it was really going full blast one had to open the windows, and as often as not the door as well, or something would most certainly have blown up.

Somehow, amongst the stove and furniture I

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managed also to get in a piano, though goodness alone knows how. And, apart from that, I remember also the difficulty there was in using it at all. For, what with the draughts which would come whistling in through the manifold chinks in the match-boarding, the candles would keep on flickering so that it was almost impossible to read the music; whilst the candles, too, would keep on guttering so that half the notes would be sticking before one had got very much further.

Which leads me to suppose, because for the life of me I can't remember, we can have had no electric light even then. That, and the memory of coming back one evening from Mess, and finding the decrepit little oil lamp in the passage-way naught but a small red glow in a stenching smother of oily smoke; of carrying it forth in great trepidation lest it should go off in a premature burst; incidentally, of burning my fingers pretty badly into the bargain.

As a beauty spot pure and simple, Bordon was a charming and attractive place indeed, deep set away in its snug bed of pine and heather. But even in these days of the motor car it would be hard not to label it "a trifle off the map." What it was in those days I should hardly like to say. The things Thomas Atkins had to remark about it were legion, but what they were, or how he said them, would never do for inclusion here. At any rate, the camp lay a good eight miles from Farnham, the nearest town of any standing, and six miles from the nearest railway station.

It makes one grateful, indeed, when one ponders on it, the extent to which improvement in communications and transport has increased our comfort and horizon nowadays. What a labour it was then, those weary six miles to the station, on a pouring wet day as likely as not, bumping slowly along in a rickety,

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ramshackle, horse-drawn vehicle, along a pot-holed road, and dependent in the main on an umbrella and a waterproof rug for setting forth on the train part of one's journey with anything approaching a dry skin.

Yet what a joy the old push bicycle, the mainstay of the ordinary man, the power to propel oneself along under one's own steam at a pace faster than a horse could trot; to whizz along the dirty, muddy roads dry-footed, what a wonderful sense of speed and freedom it gave. And exercise, too—not, I think, that we dwelt over-lovingly on that part of the business at the time. But I'm sure it kept us at least twenty per cent fitter than had we been of the modern age, and had recourse to the luxury and ease of the motor car.

Two of our number did indeed possess motor cycles. And what cycles they were! And the breakdowns! The golf course lay twelve miles distant, but it would be futile to try and remember the number of times we, on our lowly push bikes, passed that lordly couple on the side of the road in process of trying to remedy some mechanical defect or other.

Motor cars, too, were pretty tricky affairs. One car, in particular, I remember, and it could be a positive devil. But when it was in a pleasant and friendly mood it was a godsend. Particularly was it of service for shooting, for such shooting as was to be had lay sufficiently far afield, and the old horse-drawn form of transport a very slow process indeed.

It was the proud possession of our Regimental Quartermaster-Sergeant, and he, excellent fellow, having collected a few hundred pounds during the exigencies of the late Boer War, had deposited them in what he hoped, no doubt, might prove a reasonably lucrative venture.

Taken as a whole, I think one may say he was a

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very fairly reliable driver; and would dispose of such roadside obstacles as we came across from time to time during the day's run—in the nature of the odd dog, sheep, ditch and so forth—in a thoroughly satisfactory and carefree manner. Though, I must own, it did leave one at times a little bit short in the breathing organs.

It was a five-seater, two in front and three behind, access to the latter space being by means of a skilfully devised door in the back of the car; which at times was apt to shoot open rather unexpectedly, thereby adding considerably to the excitement and thrill of the thing; but which, when properly closed and correctly adjusted, you sat upon. It was a very fine car and quite comparatively of the latest design, of a wonderful vermillion hue, and we were very proud to go out in it indeed. I don't exactly know from what source he acquired it, but I have vague surmises he was rather badly done. Still, for a while, it went really very well indeed, once it had been got going; and would, no doubt, have gone on in its cheerful and fickle fashion had it not come to a sudden and remarkably sticky end.

And this is the way of its happening. A shooting party had been fixed and the car hired for the occasion. I remember the occasion well, a nice crisp autumn morning with a touch of frost in the air, and the car, very spic and span, drawn up on the gravel drive outside the Mess and looking a positive picture. I can remember how we crowded out to watch—guns being stowed away, a pleasantly large luncheon-basket, bottles of beer, finally the members of the party themselves. I remember one in particular, because he had the lumbago and he was in the back seat, and the commotion he made getting in. It took us about five minutes getting him there and settled to his satisfac-

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tion. We were really rather taken by his stoicism in going at all.

At length, everybody in and seated, the Quarter-master-Sergeant began to crank up; and in the crisp coolness of the atmosphere one envied him the warmth emanated, and which evinced itself upon his red and glowing countenance at the end of five minutes' vigorous play on the starting-handle. For cranking-up in those days was no mean matter. Indeed, it called for considerable endeavour on the part of the cranker. Incidentally, it gave also the greatest satisfaction to the disinterested spectator, to whom it afforded abundant opportunity for airing any latent humour he might happen to possess.

But, crank as he would, the car refused tenaciously to respond. A large number of openings and shuttings of its anatomy, of tinkerings and tappings at its intestines, were tried, but all apparently without result. The car seemed in a particularly dogged and fractious mood that morning, and its owner was beginning to hint darkly of frost in the cylinders, or some such strange complaint, when some bright bird, peering into the petrol tank (more probably from sheer inquisitiveness than cunning) found it stone dry.

That was where the fun began to hotten up. In fact, it got so hot that when somebody, not conversant with the fact that the petrol, in process of being decanted from the spare can, was peacefully continuing the process through a hole in the tank on to the gravel drive below, lit up a pipe and threw the match into the pool, it went up in one great sheet of flame.

That memory is as clear to me as if it had been but yesterday and, let me say here and now, it wasn't I who threw that wicked match. But a thing which

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remains clearest of all is the manner in which the owner of the lumbago left the car. For he didn't even wait to be assisted out as he had been assisted in. He just took a flying leap backwards and cleared everything in one great bound. It was a truly remarkable feat. In fact, never before nor since have I witnessed a better performance, nor a finer display of agility. The pity of it is that, in these days of lumbago cures, for the life of me I cannot remember if this one was temporary or permanent.

Another car I might make brief mention of. It belonged to my Skipper, and he was very proud of it indeed. It was, I believe, known as a "tri-car." It had three wheels, two in front and one behind. The driver sat perched in a small seat, or saddle—I forget which—somewhere near the middle, the passenger being poised out in front in a kind of bath-chair arrangement. Sitting in it one would have a desolate sort of feeling that one was there not as a passenger at all, but as a kind of buffer or bumper in case of emergency.

I only ventured out in it twice. After that I jibbed. I felt I was not really quite the right type of person for it. It seemed to want something heavier, something with more rebound to it. The first occasion was going to a shoot, and I remember well the over-thrilling experience of trying to balance not only myself, but also a pair of guns and a cartridge-bag or two, without one or other of us falling out; the whilst the scenery came streaming jerkily along in the most perilous and menacing a manner possible. Indeed, it was really rather a nightmare.

The second occasion we were out leaving cards. It was a big house to which we were directing ourselves, with rather a circular drive to it. But, with the exception of a splinter or two off the gate-post, we

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negotiated that part all right. But the flight of stone steps leading up into the house was one too many for us. The butler, a somewhat portly specimen of the race, happened to be standing on the top at the moment of our arrival, and I shall never forget his face as we started to come up those steps at him. Fortunately the car lost heart and petered out half-way up (I think it must have cut out on its own account, for it was quite obvious its driver at that moment had no control) and did a graceful curve back to the drive, else he was as good as dead: for, if ever a man was rooted to where he stood, that man most assuredly was.

I had a fair amount of opportunity of continuing my novitiate with the shot-gun here. There was quite a deal of rough shooting to be had over Government ground. We also had a small regimental shoot. Incidentally, there was little more than rabbits and the odd bird here and there on either, but it was good fun.

I nearly committed the incredible *bêtise* of bagging my Colonel, quite early in the day. We were ferreting the edge of a wood. It was a big burrow, and there was a terrible amount of scrub and bracken about. I'd been posted just inside the fringe of wood, with instructions to shoot anything breaking that way. I got one, a jolly shot, and was feeling mighty elated. Another bolted in the other direction. I had my gun to my shoulder, I'd as good as pulled the trigger—but I didn't quite. How I didn't, God alone knows! Why I didn't was because I was suddenly aware of a pair of legs which had come within my ken and which certainly hadn't been there before!

Little did they know what they missed or how narrowly. Nor did they ever. When I came out and found they were the Colonel's I nearly fainted. He'd certainly committed the sin of moving his stand

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after the shooting had begun, but that made it no better. To have so nearly committed this incredible indiscretion of bagging one's own Colonel was too awful—a nightmare too appalling even to consider. It quite put me off my shoot for the rest of the day.

Somewhere about here it was that I shot my one and only pheasant. Incidentally, it was mixed up in rather a regrettable incident. A small wood ran for half a mile or so on either side of the main road, and in it, could one but flush them, dwelt a few very fine pheasants. I regret to say I hadn't a game licence, but being out it seemed a pity not to risk it.

Our beaters consisted of half a dozen T.A.s, stalwart poachers from Bedfordshire all. But beat as they would the birds would not get up—not, that is to say, as *I* wanted them. For the thicket was dense, and the odd bird or two which got up in front of me was lost to view long before I was able to get so much as a sight on him. Or else he scuttled forth just at the crucial moment that I was in process of extricating myself from an agony of tangled thorn and bramble.

We were nearing the end of the wood, just at a point where the ground was beginning to slope gradually upwards. It was all rather exasperating, and it was getting terribly hot in there. Drops of sweat were beginning to roll down my forehead and into my eyes. I was on the verge of giving up all hopes of getting a shot with which I was capable of dealing. And then, just at that moment, up got a jolly little hen pheasant, at my very feet and right out in the open. Bang!—a tiny smother of feathers—and my bird had dropped from sight like a stone.

Now, why he dropped from sight like that was because just the other side of a low quickset hedge, in somewhat of a cutting, the road ran by; and it was

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fortunate that it was quite a pleasantly deep little cutting, for otherwise I don't know what would have happened to the one-horse wagonette which chanced to be climbing slowly and laboriously up the incline at that very identical moment.

But I don't think either myself or the beaters paid any particular attention to that item of interest just then. All that mattered for the moment was the bird. Yet, when we came to peer down into the road, and although we looked this way and we looked that, not a sign of it was to be seen anywhere; only the leisurely wagonette and a gent in a black bowler clambering laboriously back into it again.

Maybe I was a bit slow in the uptake, but it was not even when I saw half a dozen of our gallant T.A.s swarm over the hedge and surround the vehicle, that I particularly connected the bird I had just shot with the gentleman of the bowler. In fact, it wasn't till I realised a limp ball of feathers being dragged from beneath a seat, amid an exchange of courtesies of rather a lurid and intimate nature, that my rising apprehension of being intimately involved in an unprecedented act of highway robbery and violence was allayed.

One more shot I did have at a pheasant that day, but about that the less said the better. It was a fine old cock bird that came floating magnificently past where I stood, and you could have hit it over with a jam pot—if you'd had one handy. But, though I pulled at those triggers till I must well nigh have burst them, nothing whatsoever happened. Of course the gun was at *safe!* My youthful mortification was only allayed by the fulminating purple of old Cress' face on my flank, as he exploded both his barrels without so much as displacing a feather.

Dear old Cress! He was a great fellow. In fact,

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of all the men I have ever known he is, in my very humble opinion, the very finest. He was our Quarter-master, and through the whole of the four long years of the War was never once known to miss his nightly visit to the front line, to see that all was done in order and that his battalion got their day's rations; and some pretty hot journeys those were, and he no chicken at that. I am glad to say they made him a brevet lieutenant-colonel in the end.

But at that time he had not long since been promoted from R.S.M. He was a tremendously imposing figure, standing six feet four, with thick, bushy eyebrows, and a moustache which bristled in the fiercest manner possible. He had the somewhat extraordinary record of having been turned down on first trying to join up for lack of physique. But at the time of which I write he stood in the region of twenty stone; and when he held converse from the comfortable depths of his sleeping bag with the cook sergeant, across the camp region of tents in the early hours of a manœuvre morning, I can assure you that, no matter how well away you were in your dreams when he began, you were most assuredly wide awake long before he'd done. In fact, I'm afraid the Colonel used to get a trifle peevish with him at times.

I remember him in particular on first joining. I thought he must be a general at least. We youngsters held him in great awe. There was no ragging old Cress. I remember his: "Now, then, young fella! Any of your lip and I'll put you across my knee." And he would, and could have, quite easily. So we were careful.

No greater sportsman was there than old Cress—though I still have a vague feeling that I preferred him with a rod in his hand to a gun. I remember, one day,

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how cleverly he bowled over a scudding rabbit, right at my very feet, some three yards or so away. I remember his boisterously happy: "Pretty good shot, eh, John?" And indeed it was a beautiful shot; and I, being very young at the time, highly impressed. But, I fancy, looking back on it now, I wasn't even then quite sure if it wasn't potting it just a bit fine.

I frequently made use of the incident afterwards as the basis of somewhat of a good story; till one regrettable day, regaling it in a momentary fit of absent-mindedness, I found my audience none other than the hero of the tale himself. Whether or not I succeeded in producing a satisfactory impression in my new and hurriedly concocted version I have vague qualms. All I know is that I felt very hot and clammy at the time, though hoping sincerely to have had the luck to get away with it.

But I must say, when later on he took to golf, and an almost childish (I was very nearly going to say fiendish) delight in pitching his drive, if he could succeed in getting a good one, as near as he possibly could to the couple in front of him—on the principle, obviously, that the nearer it fell the less chance of its excellence being missed, and at times he hit a terribly long ball—I somehow couldn't help vaguely associating this pleasant little foible with stirring incidents of the other nature.

Soldiering in those days was a happy-go-lucky form of pastime. True, we were very serious about it when we were doing it; but the South African War was but just over and everybody was really a bit bored with warfare as a whole, and the Teutonic scare had not yet arisen. Moreover, soldiering among the commissioned ranks had not yet fully emerged from where it had originated. It was still more of a gentleman's

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pastime than a profession. Certainly not the latter. It would have been quite impossible for an officer to think of living on the then rates of pay without the addition of some form of private income.

In fact, memorising it alongside the professional urge of to-day, it makes one feel almost inclined to smile. The recollections of company training, how pleasantly peaceful! Those pre-breakfast lectures, which we listened to with such politeness and such desire to yawn. How empty one was at that hour! And *what* lectures! I'm sure our Company Commander couldn't have considered his diatribes for longer than it took him to pass from his bedside to the respectfully attendant barrack-room. Soldiering was indeed a peaceful occupation. We're professional soldiers these days, and so we've got to deliver the goods—in hours and days. But what odds does it make in the long run? It's the ability to fight that counts, and I doubt if we're any better at it now than we were then.

We were great connoisseurs of port in those days—at least, we thought we were. And, after all, a bottle of "good old fruity" could be had for three and six, and as excellent whisky as you could want at half a crown the bottle. So perhaps there was some excuse, though I fear we were not always quite so astute and knowledgeable as we thought we were. As, for instance, when a quite senior officer in Mess one night, having poured himself out and sipped a glass of port, began to splutter and choke and call down all the unpleasant things he could think of in connection with the Mess Sergeant, the Mess President, and the whole wine trade in general.

How well I remember the sudden consternation, the hasty departure of the Mess Sergeant from the

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room, the anxiety to pin the defaulting bottle to the ground; how, somehow, the rumour spread that it was not port at all, but the best liqueur brandy at fifty shillings the bottle; how the temporarily held up decanter began to circulate again, and with what speed, and how little was left in the bottom of it before ever the distracted Mess Sergeant could get it to himself again; nor yet, with what apparent relish the original objector decanted the remainder of his glass down his long-suffering and previously expostulating throat.

I recall, too, how some few years later, when I had the honour, or otherwise, of holding the proud position of Mess President, there arose a great clamour among the subaltern fraternity against the Mess port. Now, truly mistrusting their ability to know a good port when they swallowed one, and not being unduly dissatisfied myself with the offending brew, I decided to try a pleasant little dodge I'd heard tell of upon them. Which consisted merely in getting three bottles made up and labelled with different and pleasant-sounding names, and having them passed round at Mess one night for their delectation and valuable decision of choice.

The Mess Sergeant's face—for he alone besides myself was in the know—was indeed a picture; and I must say it filled me with a pleasant gratification to watch those youngsters tasting and sipping and bending their profoundest wisdom to the kindly task in hand. Indeed, it was a stupendous success, and as such, and therefore in all fairness, I will not enlarge upon it further. I only know that never once, during my rather lengthy three-year tenure of the post, did I have another serious grouse against either wine or cigarettes, the usual bane of the wretched P.M.C.

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Of fishing there was a very fairly plentiful supply to be had around the camp in those days. There was the Frensham Pond, where pike up to any size were known to dwell. The hotel, too, owned a nice little stretch of trout stream, though I fear, from the little experience I had of it, there seemed to me to be considerably more stream than trout. We did, however, a pal of mine and I, manage to catch one, and it weighed a good two pounds and a half when we got it home. He it was who hooked it, and I the one with a net, and never shall I forget my hectic plunge to the rescue by a short cut little less than a bog, nor his frantic yells for haste, nor his stern and somewhat valedictory remarks on the subject of handling a landing net.

However, we got the fish all right, though I can't help thinking, from my subsequent knowledge of his prowess with a rod, that it was beginner's luck, and that this was his one and only fish—before, and probably also since. Be that as it may, he got a V.C. later, and what, beside that, does aught else count?

In those days there was nothing like the demand for fishing there now is. Some half-dozen of us rented from a neighbouring farmer, for a matter of seven guineas, a short stretch—about a mile or so—of the River Wey, a pleasant little bit of water which lay not far distant from the Mess. Looking back on it now, I must say the price seems almost ludicrous, for in the very first years we got between two and three hundred fine trout out of that estimable little bit of water.

Nearby this little stream of ours lay a picturesque and old-world farm-house, and in it lived one of our married officers. Now, I must explain that the married officer did not abound with such frequency as he now does. In fact, matrimony in the Service was looked

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upon with considerable askance. It was very definitely supposed to be limited to only the very senior. But this one of ours, *horribile dictu!* was only a subaltern. He got away with it to a certain extent because he'd been brought into us, though I forget how or why. The situation was eased, moreover, for him in that he had a most remarkably pretty wife.

Their house lay quite close to an ancient grey stone bridge, at the back of which lay an extremely deep pool. I don't know whether it was the pool or the lady of the house which acted as the magnet, but there is no doubt whatever that, for one cause or another, this particular bit of water was always a very popular one indeed.

One of our syndicate was a very senior officer, an Irishman, and as such an enthusiastic angler. He was rather short in build and inclined to be tubby, but of a singularly cheerful disposition which normally seemed never to desert him. He was, moreover, a great sportsman. It was recorded against him how, one day walking the Indian jungle with a shot-gun, he chanced upon a panther fast asleep in a tree. Now most people would prefer, myself for one, to let sleeping panthers lie under these conditions. But not so our gallant little Irish major. He just upped with his gun and shot it—stone dead, fortunately for him.

My distinctest memory of him was a regrettable habit he had of meandering about the mess-room at breakfast time, the whilst he puffed cheerfully and whole-heartedly at a powerful, and not over-fragrant Burmah cheroot. For, no matter what the hour—and some of those summer breakfasts on a manœuvre morning were eaten pretty near at crack o' dawn—there he'd be, breakfast consumed and cheroot

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rampant; and eggs and cigar smoke don't harmonise one bit, not even on the most hardened stomach —and he was far too senior to order from the room.

But this gallant officer happened to be fishing one day at the farm-house pool. And whether it was the lady of the pool, or the pool itself which was the attraction, I would not venture to say; but there she was, not so very far away, and he, creel on back, very interested, no doubt, in what lay in the pool beneath him.

Now, a creel is a heavy and somewhat cumbrous thing at the best of times, and I have no doubt that that had some small amount to do with what followed. For, leaning unduly over the parapet, or so it is narrated, he overbalanced suddenly, toppled, and with a resounding splash went headlong into the pool; which was bad enough in itself and all conscience!

But the really distressing part of the story is this, that on emerging he beheld, to his discomfiture, the lady in fits of laughter. Whereat, so the story goes on, he stalked majestically and dripping away, nor was ever known to speak to the lady nor visit the pool again.

CHAPTER V

BERMUDA

TOWARDS the beginning of the sixteenth century, in the year 1515, to be exact, a Spaniard, one Juan de Bermudez, sailing the Atlantic for Cuba and with a cargo of hogs aboard, chanced upon a group of coral islands lying some six hundred miles east of where New York now stands; and, being shipwrecked thereon, named them after himself, Bermuda.

But it was not till close on a century later that they became colonised, when, in 1609, a Sir George Somers, also becoming shipwrecked on these islands, formed the first settlement, the island group, though still retaining its original name, passing thus successfully into the British maw.

The guide-books allude gracefully to the fascination and charm of these islands as being quite unique, and rightly so, for, from a point of sheer beauty, this coral wonderland beggars all description. It really does seem quite inconceivable that anything could be so beautiful as that first peep one gets of Bermuda, coming up on deck in the early morning and leaning upon the rails of the great ocean liner as she glides slowly and majestically along through the intricacies of the narrow, buoyed channel, a vague, scent-laden breeze softly stirring the air and a golden sun just

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beginning to show itself mistily away on the far horizon.

For there, right up against one, so close that were you to reach out a hand it would seem you might touch it almost, lay a low emerald shore, stretching far away out to right and left, deep set in a still and placid ocean, iridescently crystal in its multitudinous and ever-changing greens and blues. And, as we swept swiftly by, ever and anon would appear in the unbending straightness of its line fantastic indentations, tiny coves and inlets, verdant green right down to the water edge; whilst away above, like billowing surge of ocean roll, little cedar-clustered ridges rose and fell, mingling slowly, imperceptibly almost, into the turquoise blue of a cloudless sky.

So we sailed along awhile and then, just as the boom of gong came to remind one that breakfast was ready and waiting, suddenly we had swung and were heading seemingly straight for the shore and its line of tiny breakers. And then, ere ever one was aware of it, the marvel had happened and we were through—a tiniest slit in the islet barrier of verdant rock, a moment, and the green of the shore coming rushing down upon one—and there we were, riding placidly in the most unbelievable blue of a blue lagoon, and the pale grey-white waterfront of Hamilton scarce a stone's throw away to a flank.

Bermuda is full of surprises. But what, I think, strikes one most on first setting foot to shore is the extreme whiteness of everything, in particular the roads. Indeed, they are unpleasantly dazzling almost; though this is very easily understood since, like everything else, they are cut sheer out of the coral rock itself.

The very houses are of pure coral, great blocks of

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it sawn straight from the island bed. The blocks themselves are of a beautiful whiteness when first hewn and quite soft; but with the play of sun and weather upon them they soon tone down and gradually become hard as granite.

Charmingly picturesque, too, these little white houses with their low, tendril-clustered verandahs, dotted in and out among the spread of the cedars, the rich foliage of the banana groves, the oleander hedges a riot of pink and white; and remarkably economical, with building material so close to hand. For each little house has its own little quarry, and mighty handy and economical it is. Except . . . and there it is—the usual wicked fly in Nature's ointment.

Let me explain.

For most of the year the garrison acts in the nature of charwomen to the military institutes, offices and whatnots of the Island Establishment in general. But once a year the Governor—General Sir Walter Kitchener, brother of the great Lord Kitchener of Khartoum, it was then—holds high festival in the shape of manœuvres. So it happened, shortly after our arrival, for three solid nights and four whole days we manœuvred—that is to say, we were put through a process of harrying which only the fertile brain of our worthy General, backed by a pleasant, though at times somewhat macabre, sense of humour, could possibly have evolved.

At the end of it we were duly assembled for the final Conference, tired and bearded, but still cheerful, and pleasantly hopeful that perhaps we'd not done too badly. The General was complacent and expressed considerable satisfaction. In fact, we were beginning to preen ourselves somewhat, till—"But," he went on, and we began to surmise darkly something was

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amiss, "*in the dark!*" and he paused. "Obviously practice needed there!" He mused, passing his humorous grey eyes over our weary, but attentive forms. "Cats," he went on ruminatively, and we had a vague feeling he was playing with us, "can see in the dark. Why? Because they sleep by day and prowl by night." We began to get an uneasy sense of where he was heading. "It is all too obvious that you, gentlemen, reverse the process—that you prowl by day and sleep by night. . . ."

That was the general trend of it. The actual result was that twice a week thereafter we assembled in Mess for dinner in khaki. The meal eaten, we gathered, together with some few unfortunate N.C.O.'s, in single file and in silence in the wake of a selected officer who, during the day, by dint of map and compass, had laid a drag for our subsequent nocturnal delectation across country. And thus, dismal, but hopeful still that, luck holding out and the gods permitting, we might at some distant hour yet get back to the Mess alive, and to the goodly supply of alcoholic beverage ordered in advance for our reviving, thus, I say, we passed sorrowfully out into the night.

For to proceed across country in these islands even by day is bad enough, but in the dark it is really looking for a great deal of trouble. Because, save where there is a house or an area of cultivation, everywhere else is virgin forest; and the penetrative power of a cedar stump, when it comes hard up against your unprotected shin bone, is terrific. Moreover, the number of times one just missed breaking an ankle, or even one's neck, was out of all reckoning. In fact, this "cat crawling," as it came to be nicknamed, became really too hot to last. It came to an untimely end in this wise.

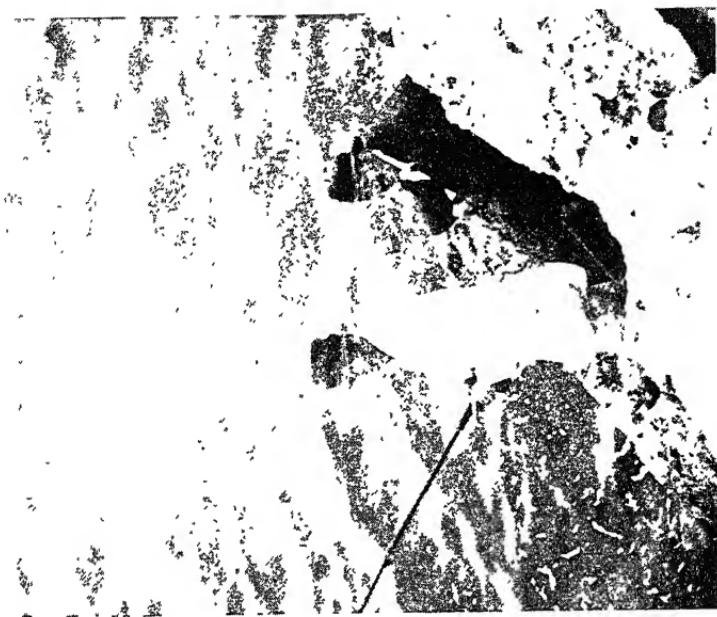
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Our senior Major, having for this particular occasion planned out with great care our evening's amusement, we duly set forth on a pitchy night, myself in his immediate wake, next the Colonel, and then the rest in replete and straggling order of varying stages of priority. Why I held my own important priority was, from a point of theory, to aid where necessary our gallant guide and leader; but, from point of fact, I had vague surmisings later on, in the nature of a sort of buffer between him and my C.O. in the event of untoward incident or other emergency.

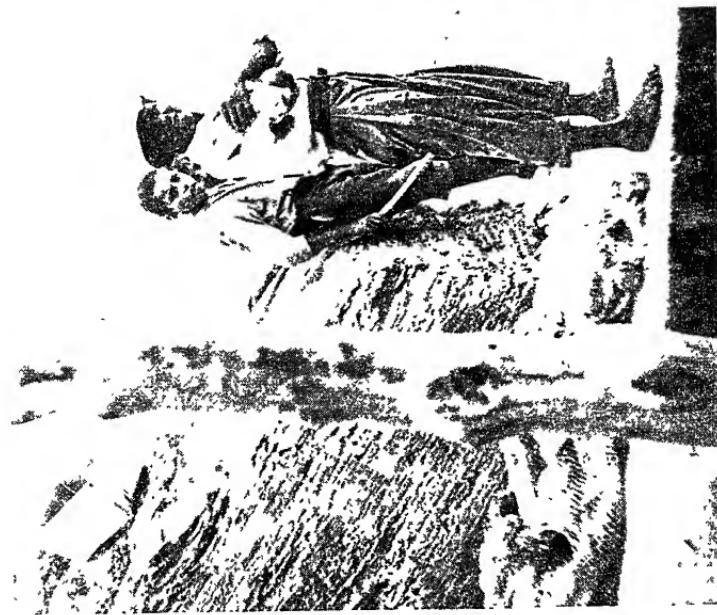
At any rate, off we went, and before very long had definitely missed our way; and before we had gone much further were very lost indeed. So much so that, after a considerable period of halting, followed by a good deal of zigzagging, suddenly, and to my no small discomfiture, I found myself, so far as my immediate front was concerned, very definitely alone. But receiving also, about the same time, a vigorous thrust in the small of the back, to the vocal accompaniment of a hearty oath, from my Colonel (who had caught his foot in a stump I'd had the good fortune to miss, and was in process of falling), with great presence of mind I seated myself gracefully though somewhat precipitately upon the edge of the yawning chasm whereon I most undoubtedly at that moment found myself.

Which acumen on my part saved, no doubt, not only his life and limbs and my own, but also that of our gallant, though unfortunate, leader; whose dim outline, rather like that of a gigantic and feebly kicking beetle, I could now descry faintly some ten or fifteen feet beneath me, and upon whom the Colonel, not possessing my youthful keenness of vision, would most assuredly have gone headlong.

*Fishing from
the Boxes*



BERMUDA



*Native fisher boys with
nets and water-grass*

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But out of evil often cometh good; and this untimely incident, fortunately, thanks to a kindly outcrop of undergrowth, eventuating in a few scratches only, brought our cat-crawlings (which by this time were gradually becoming famous in the Island) to an inglorious, but highly gratifying end. I only record this incident to show you that the aforementioned pleasant little manner of quarrying, amidst all its other excellent qualities, had its occasional ups and downs.

I might add that the course of affairs, out of which this little incident arose, had its sequel the following year. This time, being beset again by a similar harrying process, our Colonel being chief umpire and the senior Major in full command, there came a time when our swarming foes had reached a magnitude almost unbelievable. Indeed we were definitely in the soup, so to speak, as we stood, and no doubt the General rubbing his hands at his own astuteness and the agreeable trials and tribulations once more in store for us.

But this time he'd reckoned without his host. For our gallant commander—and later on, during the early crises of the Great War, I had the honour to command a company under him, and under no better nor more gallant leader could it have possibly been my lot to serve—our gallant commander, I say, swiftly summing up the situation, riposted in a very shrewd, though, I doubt not, to the General, somewhat unexpected manner.

For, not a stone's throw from the back of the Mess lay a fine old fort, strongly built of solid rock, grim and grey, and still in a most remarkable state of preservation; and into this and at dead of night, having been very careful first to lay in copious stocks

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of foodstuffs to last a week at least, and purloined from the emergency stores in barracks; in keeping with a goodly supply of beverages as suitable to the coolness of the evenings, and a plentiful supply of playing cards; he withdrew with all his forces and, planting the Regimental flag proudly on topmost bastion, settled down to meet the worst.

Nor was the General slow to respond, and during the next forty-eight hours we were submitted to every kind of warlike devilment and stratagem imaginable. We were pounded, we were battered. It is impossible to record the weight of ordnance or the inconceivable types of explosive and deadly missile which his creative and fertile imagination produced for our undoing. Minor attack and major attack were hurled upon us in incredible profusion. Scarce an hour passed than a blue flag, or a red flag, or some such other representation of hostile attack directed itself against our grim defence. But still on its blood-stained bastion the Regimental flag waved—proudly and unbeaten, as it was to during four years of bloody war soon to follow. In fact, it was all really most exhilarating.

Time and again were we implored by our unfortunate Umpire Staff: "for God's sake to come out and make a fight of it!" For, surely to goodness, this thing was most unorthodox and entirely out of keeping with every known schedule of training and manœuvre regulation! To which, time and again, did our worthy commander return the same reply: "If he was coming out he'd got to be jolly well dug out!"

And so it went on and so it seemed likely to continue. And here, let me explain, is where our General's true sense of humour showed itself. For, in place of wrath descending, which I feel sure was

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the hourly anticipation of our unfortunate chief umpire, and in place of caustic conference, instead came sudden and welcome news (imaginary of course) of British marines landing from all quarters of the Island, together with hearty congratulations (still imaginary) on a great and successful stand; to which, and I feel sure to the intense relief of our Colonel, was added (this time not imaginary) the General's own personal and heartiest compliments and congratulations.

So ended a memorable siege though, should you think to look, I fear you will be unable to find any trace of it in any known annals of the gallant deeds of the British Army.

Most of Bermuda's leading citizens, the old families, are directly descended from the original settlers in the Island. They are, too, its leading merchants, and you will find most of the big shops and warehouses in its Capital, the town of Hamilton, bearing their names. And in those days, and maybe now also, both they and their sons and their daughters took active part in the running of these establishments.

Which, I must confess, required getting a bit used to at first. For, to find oneself being served with a choice of braces, or blend of cigarettes, by the son of the house where one had been dining or tennising the day before, was apt to be a trifle disconcerting, to say the least of it. But one soon got used to it, the unassuming, easy-going unconventionalness of the custom, and found it a really very agreeable and pleasant manner of doing one's bits of morning shopping.

The American season, the winter period of the year, is a riot of Boston and Chicago. We dropped right into it on very first arrival; and to those of us

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who had not met Uncle Sam in his native haunts before, the experience was pleasantly intriguing.

I must say the emancipated American girl (for the English girl had hardly yet begun to throw off the thraldom of chaperonage) rather took one's breath away at times. One wasn't used to it. To be asked quite casually by a pretty girl, with a *retroussé* nose and a Chicago accent, to take her for a bathe that afternoon if one hadn't anything better to do, left one, to say the least of it, groping somewhat feebly at first. But one got used to it after a while.

It seems to me now we used to dance a terrible lot. There was a dance at one or other of the big hotels every night of the week, Sundays excepted. There had been a time when officers of the garrison had been in the habit of slipping down to these dances after Mess in their Mess kit. This precedent, we were glad to find, was taboo by the time of our arrival, an American agency having exploited the presence of "Officers in Mess kit," as an apparent *pièce de résistance* in the variegated claims set forth in their honeyed advertisements. So, instead, we used to tuck our coat tails into our trouser pockets and skim down to the town on push-bikes, agreeably forgetful for the moment of the weary pull up the hill afterwards in the small hours of the morning.

I don't think the Colonel was over pleased with this matter. Certainly the deserted atmosphere most nights in Mess can hardly have been over-congenial. But I think his chief apprehension was for the susceptibilities of his youthful tiros among so much beauty. Almost as much as that of the troubled matron who, in the early hours of the morning, accosted the amorous couple on the waterfront beneath her window with a weary: "Say, Captain!

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Has your watch stopped?" Yes, indeed, the American girls were very beautiful.

The main group of islands lies in the form of a gigantic C, linked up here and there by narrow strips of causeway, some of which, passing from island to island, are half a mile or more in length. In the centre is the big lagoon, deep and blue and very still in the intensity of its serene, unruffled calm. Its colours are multitudinous almost, and it really is marvellous the variations of blues and greens one gets at touch of wind or sun.

Across its surface tiny craft of all sorts flit busily back and forth, now a tiny sail—the famous Bermuda rig—now a swiftly scurrying motor-boat. Over there in the distance the ancient ferry-boat paddling its way peacefully between the mainland and the little naval island of Boaz.

Bathing in the lagoon is great fun. In the summer the water is so warm that one can stay in all day if so minded. Bathing picnics, particularly by moonlight during these months, were much indulged in. Mixed bathing in England was still looked upon with a stern eye, but out here it was an accepted fact. And how frightfully pure and good it was! Not, I mean to say, that it is any different now. It was the clothes. What wonderful bathing garments we mixed in! Skirts well below the knee, and as often as not, stockings—the ladies, that's to say; whilst a one-piece garment was quite outside the pale.

Personally, I preferred the bathing on the reef side of the island, from the shelter of one or other of the many little sandy coves to be found here. To take a great foaming wave full on its crest, to come rushing headlong in upon it, to be flung high and dry far up upon the soft, warm, pink-and-white sand, what a

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thrill it was! And what bad shots one made in the learning, and how one used to get ducked, and how often did one come within inches of breaking one's back.

For the waves at times run mighty high, and should one leap too soon, the second onslaught coming tumbling down upon you far swifter than the first—for a wave seems always built in two—suddenly you find your legs gripped from behind, as in an iron hand whipping them high above your head, whilst another hand drives your chest and extended arms into the soft silk of the sand, until you're minded at times to feel you're almost a goner. And then suddenly you are flung breathlessly high and dry, and after a moment's respite, basking in the warm sun, in you go and try your luck with another.

This surf bathing, as it is called, is remarkable fun, but it requires careful watching; for the undertow in places is terrific, and no amount of swimming will save you once you are caught in it. It is recorded that a colonel and his wife swam for an hour and a half one day within quite a few yards of shore, and it was only an accidental breaker which washed them to shore and safety on the point of complete collapse.

A couple of youngsters had an equally unpleasant experience when bathing one afternoon in Harrington Sound: for, finding themselves in similar plight, they realised the only alternative left was to swim the two intervening miles across to the other side where some fishing boats were. Which they did, being aided by a pair of water-wings one of them happened to have, and there fainted.

These fishermen are a jolly lot of fellows, black as your hat for the most part, but always keen and ready to take you out when and where you will. They

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spring from the ancient aborigines of the island, the other part of the coloured population, negroes, being mainly the descendants of freed slaves from America. And they are blacker still. But you mustn't say so! The word nigger is the highest insult. He's a coloured gentleman, and you must be very careful about it indeed.

Thomas Atkins used to find this nicety of nomenclature of great inconvenience on first arrival. To him, with his easy-going tongue, and an aptness at the best of times to refer to a spade as a spade, everything connected with a black skin was automatically a nigger. It led at first to an odd fracas or two, but, like everything else in Nature, given time and a hopeful constitution, rectification came all in its own due course.

The method among these fishermen of distributing the day's catch was much as one would find it thirty years or so ago in our own coastal towns. But, in place of the little barrows and well-remembered cat-call, the Bermudian fish-vendor uses a cart and an enormous conch-shell, on which latter he produces a long droning call, heralding his arrival to the multitudinous tiny houses and hutments tucked away among the countryside. Indeed, you could hear it for miles away across the water on a clear day, and a mighty tuneful and fantastic sound it was too.

The waters of these islands are a deep-sea fisherman's paradise—if he has the stomach for it. Mighty fish abound. The whip ray lives here, a gigantic, bat-like creature with an enormous tail. You are aware of him sometimes passing beneath your boat, a vague, dark shadow as of a tiny cloudlet sweeping swiftly by. In those days big-game fishing had not really been thought of, let alone brought to the high art it now is,

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so that I, for one, never tried for, nor saw any of these great fish caught.

But the waters swarmed with every other variety of game fish imaginable. In my mind the grey snapper takes first precedence; he was a game fighter indeed. Then there were the yellowtuns, or so we called them, a mackerel type of fish with a beautiful slash of yellow down either side, and the fiercest of fighters. And the rock-fish, and he ran up to a hundred pounds or so. Even that wicked fellow, the shark, for on rod and line he's a tiger to fight; though, when he's about, if you're not fishing for him you may as well pack up and go home, for "nivver the shnell of another fish will you be finding in that district."

The rock-fish lives mainly away out among the great reefs, a low, dark line of bare jagged rocks, two or three miles away out to sea. The fishermen have a method of locating him by what is known as a water-glass. It is a very simple affair consisting merely of a wooden box, some eighteen inches square at top and sloping down to about a foot at bottom, wherein is fitted a square of plain and ordinary glass. This being placed on the surface of the water, and therby removing all refraction, it is possible, in the remarkable opaqueness of the sea and its pale coral bed, to look down and see quite clearly everything beneath you, almost to any depth of water.

Down there among the coral fastnesses these great rock-fish make their home. And moving slowly along, peering from time to time into the little water-glass, you may see one, little else probably than his great, lazy head sticking out from the door of his rocky home. Then, taking your line and its fine big hook—anything up to eight inches in length, cun-

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ningly concealed inside the rather smelly and decayed carcass of a goodly-sized fish—quietly and deftly you lower till it dangles a foot or so clear of that great, disinterested-looking head. Then suddenly there's a bang, and your arm's half wrenched out of its socket; and if you don't hang on to the line and haul like fun he's gone: for the coral is pure glass and a touch on the hard-strained line (and it's the thickness of a good-sized pencil at that) is as the touch of a razor blade. And you've got to be smart, too, for the singing line will cut through your flesh just as easily as the coral rock will snick your line.

I'm afraid I didn't do much of this reef fishing myself. I tried it several times, and from a point of fishing, with very fair success. But otherwise it was no good. I can stomach a moving boat quite well (in fact, I was quite popular among the yachting fraternity, when a bit of ballast or a good baler was required), but an anchored one I simply cannot. Moreover, anchored or not, the diverse smells in those fishing boats were adequately moving even on land. I'd stoop hopefully over the side and take a look in the glass. Then the boat'd give a heave, and I'd give a heave . . . and then the boat'd give another heave, and I'd give another heave—and then—well, then it was all up, and only one thing left to be done—get home as quickly as possible. Oh, dear! How bilious it makes me feel, even now, the mere recollection of it all those long, long years ago!

But there were places off shore where it was possible to get as much and as good fishing as any man could possibly desire. In particular, there was one most marvellous place, a tiny islet at the St. George's end of the island, situate at the entrance to the harbour—a harbour large enough to accommodate a vast fleet

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—and strongly fortified with walls and bastions once manned by a permanent garrison.

To-day, its ancient ramparts stand strong and good, but the old-time barracks within have crumbled slowly into disrepair from long disuse, the lone habitation now of giant spiders, ants, and flying cockroaches. Big as your thumb they are, those horrible cockroaches—*ping!* and on to your shoulder and all down your arm they'd run . . . ! They'd turn up in your food. I remember—but let me draw a veil. . . .

One had to pass through the ancient place to get to the point from which one fished. Here and there you could still make out shadowy pathways among the thin scrub and matted undergrowth, derelict doors and windows, bare, jagged walls, the roofs long since gone. It always had for me an eerie, creepy sensation, particularly when the sun had dipped behind the far horizon. I even made of it a lovely ghost story, which a kindly editor was pleasantly minded enough to accept.

Reaching the far side one came to an opening in the high rampart, and here, facing out to the open sea, one found oneself at the summit of a high cliff which sloped away in the nature of a gigantic hump, its grey face a crinkly jag of tiny coral incrustations, giving sure hold to wisely shod feet, and descending slowly to within a dozen feet or so of the water surface, according to the ebb and flow of the tide. For, just at this point, the hump came to a full stop, standing out sheer and jagged in mid-air, and forming a natural sort of balcony wherein had been quarried, by the one-time garrison no doubt, a couple of tiny trenches or boxes.

Exactly for what purpose those little boxes had been dug I cannot say, whether for fishing or domestic

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use or elsewise I know not. But, obviously the cliff must have been in the nature of a refuse shoot of sorts, and doubtless in those days a certain draw for a host of offal-loving fish. And, strangely enough, though a decade of years has passed, you will always find there a swarm of tiny fish, and in and out among them a quantity of grey snapper, anything from a pound to twenty, moving restlessly to and fro, their big searching eyes directed upwards, it would seem, to the dark and overhanging zone from which, in years gone by, their daily rations would descend.

Fine fish these, and mighty spirited; at times, too, mighty wary. Looking down upon them, circling around, unscared and hungry apparently, it would have seemed one had but to drop a hook into their mouths to catch them. But far from it! Considerable craft was required. The manner of fishing for them was this: Upon the calm face of the water you cast a goodly handful of small bait—fry it is called. Then into the boiling midst and seething whirl of these great fish you dropped, on tarpon line, a little hook baited with single fry and, were the day propitious (for on some days they were canny and artful as monkeys, and on others voracious as young tigers) in a moment you were in and your line singing out with a screech and a yell. And once again it was hilly-haul for, if you gave him an inch, snick went your line and he was gone.

I hadn't got a proper sea rod, but I made do with a heavy bamboo rod, purchased locally and highly unreliable, in fact, a pretty poor sort of contraption altogether. I shouldn't like to say the number of times I spliced and re-spliced that rod. Before I'd finished that trip I'd worn it down to the first joint and it was practically useless. But it did the trick. I

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don't know how many of those beautiful fish I didn't catch. The biggest was in the vicinity of ten pounds. The real whoppers—which I *didn't* get—were as crafty as seals, and appeared to require something more in the nature of a steel hawser than the ordinary line.

A local fisherman, who acted in the nature of gillie to me, a hefty, muscular fellow, called Garston, filled me with intense admiration, for he fished with a hank of tarpon line I lent him, in his fingers, and how he did it he alone knows. I tried it once myself and, being so prodigiously burnt and cut about at the end of half an hour, gave it up in rage and despair.

For the yellowtuns, who never ventured within close range of shore, one had another method, the hand line proper. This one would bait and hurl out to sea, leaving it to dangle there, lightly kinked round one of the old rust-worn staples conveniently driven into the face of the cliff nearby. Then, presently, seeing it jerking gently, one would snatch it hastily and give a heave; and then, hand over hand and as hard as one could go, in would come the kicking line and a beautiful yellow-slashed yellowtun at the end of it, kicking and splashing mightily and a good couple of pounds or more, if luck were kind.

One day a great rock-fish, fifty to eighty pounds at least, came swimming leisurely in and drew to rest a moment, serene and tempting, at our very feet. With what trepidation did we dangle a tempting bait within an inch of his scornful nose, and with what palpitations did we creen and watch. But all to no good, for with a parting wave of his great tail he turned slowly and in a moment was lost to view.

Though I wondered later whether he, or one of his fraternity, didn't pay me a call in spite of it. On that

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occasion I had cast a bait far out to sea and hoped for something big. It was a line thick as a pencil, a hook on it with shank a good four inches long, and for bait a piece of fish well nigh a pound in weight; and, giving it a couple of turns round a convenient staple, left it to dangle there.

Now, noting presently what appeared to be somewhat of a quiver, I withdrew the line and, feeling something there, struck. It was obvious a fish was there all right, but of no size or importance it would have seemed, and slowly and easily I began to heave him in. So all went well for half a dozen turns or so, when suddenly there came a terrific wrench at my hands. Suddenly the line simply tore away. For one agonising moment it sang with a mighty sense of burning through my clutching fingers. Then, half jerked out of my box with line kinked tight and inexorably round the fingers of my right hand, I was slowly and surely in process of being hauled ignominiously off the rock. A sickening moment that, for I was all alone and not a soul within shouting distance, and the thought of a watery grave looming horribly big about me.

Fortunately for me the strain on the line was too great and, just as I was in the act of toppling over, it broke and I shot backwards to security. But I did not get off entirely scatheless, for two raw and bleeding gashes showed in the first and little fingers of my hand, where they had been cut to the bone, the marks of which I carry with me to this day.

What it was one cannot say. In all probability it was either a giant rock-fish or a shark which had fallen upon the smaller fish I'd hooked and was bringing in. Be that as it may, I doubt which ranked foremost in my mind at that moment, mortification at

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losing so great a fish, or gratitude at so miraculous an escape from a watery grave.

But, indeed, it was an ideal fishing spot, that great hump of rock, and nowhere else that I could find in the whole island group to touch it. A friend once asked me to take him out, and so we duly fixed a rendezvous. He professed to being an enthusiastic fisherman. I warned him that it was a pretty hard day, but he assured me he was on for anything; so that, being used myself to a pair of my oldest and dirtiest flannel bags, a shirt with handkerchief knotted at the throat, rope-soled shoes and no socks on these occasions, I must confess to mild surprise on arrival at the dirty little landing-stage, and chugging motor-boat no less dirty, to find him in immaculate white duck suiting, a charming, white panama hat, and everything else to match.

However, that was his affair and off we set, and a glorious half-hour's run it was across the blue lagoon seaward to where the little grey-bastioned islet lay. The bait that day was squid, and I couldn't help feeling, in view of the white duck suiting, that Garston's selection for this occasion was, to say the least of it, hardly fortunate. But I have terribly vivid recollections of my friend's face when, later, impaling a squid on the hook, he received a well-directed squirt of inky fluid which positively covered him from head to foot.

There is, of course, somewhat of a trick in baiting with squid; but for the life of me it never struck me that a keen fisherman, and a denizen of the island as well, could possibly be ignorant of so small a matter—and I fear he felt a bit indignant. That poor duck suiting was in a dreadful state before we left, but I don't think he really can have been much of a fisher-

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man because, apart from that, he got so bored so soon. In fact, in course of time so did I with him, being for this reason impelled to come away hours sooner than was my wont; and that's a hard thing on any true fisherman!

But maybe it will act as warning to anyone who goes out with squid and doesn't know about it. Take a tip and *don't* put on your best suiting, and get somebody to show you how to bait your hook before you get going.

CHAPTER VI

IRELAND

PARTLY being of Irish extraction, but mainly, no doubt, because of the remarkable yarns one had heard about the sport still available to the man of limited means in Ireland, it had been for many a year my big ambition to pay a visit to this nebulous land of bog and lake. But never, even in my wildest dreams, had I got so far as daring to hope that it would one day be realised in the process of my ordinary military duties.

Yet so it turned out to be. Autumn of the year nineteen hundred and thirteen found me settled down with my regiment in the big, square, red-bricked barracks of Mullingar, pleasantly hopeful of many good things in the sporting line to come, and so little mindful as yet of the mighty conflagration swiftly kindling up against us and about to burst with such appalling suddenness, scarce ten short months ahead, upon a restless but unexpectant world.

I say unexpectant, but looking back on those distant days, I often wonder how much of what was coming was really known amongst the innermost circles. A great deal more, I can't help feeling, than has ever, even now, been owned up to. We ourselves, however, the men of the firing line, the cannon-fodder, as our potential enemy, the Boche, was wont

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to put it in his cheerful and amiable way, we were blissfully ignorant. Germany was a very definite bogey. There were no two pins about that. But exactly how or why lay folded still in the mists, as yet more a matter for chaff than anything else. And yet, dim and grey behind it all, the knowledge was there, the recognition that one day, sooner or later, most assuredly she would try a throw with us; nor will you ever, with all your League of Nations talk, talk me into believing that any immediate declaration of our determination to come in the moment the gauntlet was thrown down to France, or any other ferocious form of action on our part either, would have staved off that bout. Either then, *with* our Allies, or later *alone*, as sure as fate it'd got to come. To us soldiers it was a pleasant thought to toy with, and gave greater incentive for efficiency. But it was of the Future, and for the moment the Present was good enough for us. We were come to a land of sport and as such were prepared to make the most of it.

Free sport, too, one had always imagined it, that pleasant state of affairs where one took one's rod or gun, and fished and shot when and where one listed. But there, I fear, we made an error. Perhaps elsewhere in Ireland, but certainly not in Mullingar. Faring forth, myself and another, shortly after arrival, and shooting up a neighbouring bog with some success—for we brought home, so far as I can remember, half a dozen couple of fine fat snipe—what was our dismay, to say the least of it, to receive the following day a cryptic message from the local butcher—or baker, or bootmaker; somebody like that, I forget which—referring to private shooting grounds and requesting us, politely enough, kindly to keep off them in future.

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And so we found it everywhere—within reach of barracks, that is to say—for most of us were still dependent on the push bike, or country “cyar,” for our means of getting about, and neither one nor the other took one very far; whilst much hiring of motor-cars was an expensive luxury quite out of the question. Thus it seemed that shooting, for the moment at any rate, was a dismal “wash out.” We turned with renewed hopes to the fishing; for even a casual glance at the map showed the country-side round Mullingar fairly teeming with the great lakes one had heard spoken of with such awe.

But once more our hopes seemed doomed to disappointment. We inquired among the locals. Trout? (It was not yet the season, but it was worth inquiring about.) They only shook their tousled heads and spat. “Indade an’ there *were!* Faith an’ didn’t the wather fair swarm wid thim”—a squirt of tobacco juice here, gloomily, among the cobble stones—“till thim say craythurs’d swep in an’ ate thim all up.” By “say craythurs” one learnt later was meant that villainous pest, the black-headed gull; and, indeed, I believe there was complete warrant for the gloomy pronouncement which followed: “An’ now, sorrh, civil the shmall of one would ye be getting the day.”

That was charming! Rather helplessly one murmured: “Pike?” The sombre jowls expanded into the semblance of a grin. “Thim bhoys! Ach!—” That was more hopeful. There *were* pike—up to an awful size apparently—and duck. Things were beginning to look up. Could we be taken out? We could. A date was made. A couple of disreputable and distinctly leaky rowing boats took rods and guns aboard. For three solid hours we trolled, with fingers growing rapidly more numb every moment, but

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"thim bhoys" failed to respond. Indeed, they seemed most thoroughly to have gone to ground for the day. Not so much as the "shmell" of one did we get, only an interminable tangle of weed. So much so that, enticing as our spoons might be, not even the most voracious and enormous of pike could one picture being misled into swallowing the messy accumulation of weed and slime we seemed most of the time to be pulling along behind us.

The attempts to shoot a duck were equally abortive. I have a vague idea one did go over my head, but it was quite dark, so it might just as well have been a coot, or a cormorant, or even an old crow, for all I knew. We squelched ashore, bade a dismal good night to our good-for-nothing seducers, clambered stiffly aboard a rickety side-car, and so made for home and the whisky flagon.

My stay in Mullingar was brief. My chief memory is connected with horse-flesh. There was a very fine pack of hounds, the West Meath, with a hard-riding American master. That and polo seemed to absorb the minds of the local gentry—to the exclusion of everything else. I have always been fond of horses and loved a good day with hounds more than anything else, but I never have really been able to understand the horsey bore. I can understand to a certain extent the man who makes a living by it, but I must say an infinity of horse talk leaves me rather cold. It's bad enough in an English hunting centre, but here, in Mullingar, it was positively amazing. If you paid a call, and happened to find your host or hostess at home, as sure as fate it'd be in the stable. Or, if that were not so, you were whisked round there before you could say knife, where for the next half-hour you admired horses, and you talked horses, and you had

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another look at the horses, and then (as a sort of after-thought) you went in and had tea. And there you continued to talk horses, and after tea—or a whisky and soda, if you preferred—back again to the stables to see the horses fed; unless you were strong-minded or lucky enough to make a bolt and get away with it. It really was pretty terrific. And yet, withal, never have I met with greater friendliness or hospitality. So perhaps there is more in this horse-talk business than meets the eye. . . .

Of hunting I got but little, which was sad; for my horse went lame on me after the second day out, and before he was fit again I was off to England—Courses and leave and suchlike things. I did, however, just before leaving, get one real good day with the snipe. There came an invitation from a parson—whose name and residence I clean forget—some thirty miles away in the depths of the country. Would one or two of us care to come for a day's snipe shooting? It was kind of him; we most certainly would. We duly presented ourselves, three in number, in an ancient hired motor-car, at the Vicarage, squeezed him in at the back and away we went.

Our host was a dapper little man in black parsonic clothes, a pair of black gaiters over his trousers, and a black cap. He gave assurance of a lot of snipe just in, but hoped we'd not mind a wetting. "They're very wet, these Irish bogs," he opined, a mild twinkle at the back of his amiable grey eyes. "I don't expect you're too used to them yet?" He was quite right, we weren't, and they were—very wet. Indeed, hardly had I put one foot in front of the other than in I went, bang through what had seemed to me a thoroughly solid bit of bog, but which turned out to be nothing but weed, and had to be ignominiously

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pulled out. It was a narrow rectangular hole into which I had fallen so precipitately, no more than a couple of feet or so across. That, it appeared, was how the locals cut their peat. An infernal nuisance, but having, at least, the saving grace of giving you a chance to save your skin (for there seemed to be an unfathomable depth of water beneath it all), even if it did incur you in a jolly good ducking. Or maybe it was just a little touch of Irish humour; one never knows out there. But it made me as canny as a monkey for the rest of the day.

And so I managed to avoid a further ducking, of this nature. Once the trick of it had been explained—unfortunately for me, a bit late in the day—it soon became easy enough to spot these wretched little reed-covered pits, and stick to true bog. Of snipe there were a-plenty, fine, big fellows and, the sun being nicely up and pleasantly warm, inclined to lie. So that, as the shadows began to lengthen towards us from the hilly ground away to the West, my poacher-pockets were beginning to get almost unpleasantly heavy.

Indeed, it was *considerably* later than one had anticipated. I think the little parson in his enthusiasm must have rather lost count of time. He pointed ruefully to a squelchy channel of dark green water, some ten feet across or so. It had an unpleasant, bottomless look about it—rather like the peat holes. Apparently it was either that or—and he pointed to a bank of trees a good mile away in the distance. We were alone, the other two having been sent off on a different beat.

I looked at that murky channel and I looked at the little parson. I couldn't see him getting across, anyway. He had an idea. "It's a bit big for me," he

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suggested, "but, if *you* care to jump it, there's a rattling good patch of bog the other side, and I'll go round and meet you the other end."

The blazes! That was putting me to the test with a vengeance I've always hated to be dared to do a thing. I suppose I'm not strong-minded enough. I simply cannot resist. So there was no getting out of it now. Neck or nothing, I'd got to do it.

Trying my best to appear as nonchalant as possible, I unloaded, pocketed the two cartridges, and, taking a pace or two from the edge, hurled myself desperately into space. And a jolly good hurl it must have been, or else the water was deceptive, or it was pure funk, for I landed on the other bank—*squish!* but a good three feet clear of the murky stream.

Maybe it was that, added to a disinclination to walk round and miss another half-hour's shooting, which had an overbalancing effect on the other bank. For the little man suddenly, having felt the take-off with ginger foot, gave out that he was going to have a shot at it too—if I would be good enough to stand by in case he went short.

Which, a second later, he duly did, and went in with a merry and resounding plop; but came to no worse an end by reason of the fact that I'd fastened on to the collar of his coat before he'd had time to go too far under. But I must confess that when I came to realise, as I hauled him out, that his gun was fully loaded and hammers at full cock, and that, during the whole period of his flight, and a good deal of the time that I was dragging him out as well, the barrels were pointing directly at my unwitting stomach, I couldn't help feeling that his manner of observing one of the most fundamental laws of shooting, particu-

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larly in view of my office of Good Samaritan, was, to say the least of it, a trifle light-hearted.

But let that pass. After all, we were in Ireland; and, moreover, who could possibly bear a grievance against so friendly a little man, or one so kindly and hospitable and who had provided us, too, with such an excellent day's sport?

At this time, as such who lived in those days will remember, the Ulster question was beginning to loom ever larger and more menacing on the near horizon. The British Parliament, headed by Mr. Asquith and goaded on by that most excellent fellow, Mr. John Redmond, was hard at it. Ireland at last was to be given Home Rule; Ulster was to become an integral part of a home-governed Ireland; the Nationalists were to have her bag and baggage. Ulster said "*No!*"—most emphatically. Secession from Great Britain was neither her object nor desire. Not for this had she built up her hard-won prosperity. Neither had she any intention of handing it over willy-nilly to her prodigal and thriftless neighbour. She was very definite. She was prepared to be diplomatic; but, diplomacy failing, she was even prepared to continue her aims with weapons not contained in its lists. She began to arm.

Thus had it started. So it had gone on. Following the example of Ulster, Nationalist Ireland, the non-Ulster States, began to arm and drill likewise. So, too, the Nationalists in Ulster. Tension was becoming daily more acute. Gun-running, secretly and by night, was becoming a common occurrence.

About this time I was up at the Curragh with a bayonet-fighting and tug-of-war team, competing in the eliminating round of the Irish Command. Everybody was feeling that a crisis must be near at hand,

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but how near, or what it would be when it came, was all still matter for conjecture. It came, as such events always do, suddenly and without warning. It caught me in the middle of dinner—urgent orders to return to Mullingar at once! An hour later we were in the train. Towards midnight, in a hard frost which made the pavement ring beneath our feet, we marched through a dark and deserted Dublin.

We arrived at Mullingar in time for breakfast. The Battalion was in feverish process of mobilising, for what we knew not. Rumour and fact were jostling one another for precedence. And then came the Curragh incident. . . . Let us leave it at that! A few short hours afterwards we received our orders —to move forthwith into Ulster, Headquarters to Enniskillen, a company each to Omagh and Armagh.

And now rumour began to speed on swifter wings. Ulster was up. Communications were cut. We should have to fight our way from Fermanagh on. It was all rather disconcerting, this sudden plunge into civil war. A regrettable and miserable affair altogether, yet one which had to be got on with. We were soldiers, servants of the Government, and orders are orders. There were no possible two ways about it. There never have been, there never can be. Whatever Party be in power, whatever be the issue, if England is going to exist, such it must always be.

And so we took to our train, and so we passed speedily on and came to the junction station of Clones, and there we had a meal, and an excellent meal it was, nor yet a sign of anything but cordial greeting and general peacefulness and goodwill everywhere.

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We were mildly astonished, to say the least of it. But our arrival at Enniskillen, that was a shock, indeed, for, in place of hostile crowds, in place of revolution and barricaded streets, in place of all this, a garlanded platform, brass band, local magnates, an altogether remarkable reception.

And so it went on. My arrival an hour or so later with my Company at Omagh was similar in every way—flags, bunting, the local brass band, a dozen or so of the leading gentry and officials, very nearly a speech. Whoever had organised it all I haven't the vaguest idea, even now. But it was devilish clever, and that's saying the least of it.

As far as I could gather, the fundamental purpose of our despatch to Omagh was to guard the Barracks—it being the depot of the Royal Inniskillen Fusiliers; but one couldn't help wondering at times what would be our rôle if the Ulstermen and the Nationalists set about each other's throats. Instructions on this point were conspicuous by their absence. It made me dismally to ponder what would be my own action in such a contingency. We were a terribly small handful. Whatever it would have been is in the lap of the gods, and there it remains; for, although alarms and scares were frequent enough, whilst time and again we were confined to Barracks pending events, not so much as a minor fracas or incident came to mar the serenity of our five months' residence in this friendly zone.

Indeed, it was a charming spot. But the big thing to me about this move was that it brought my fishing dreams to realisation at last. Never have I known such fishing, before or since. Not only was there an abundance of every kind of water imaginable, but every single bit of it seemed to be positively swarming

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with trout—and, for those who required it, salmon into the bargain as well.

One had laboured previously under the somewhat erroneous impression that Omagh was on the River Foyle. But that, apparently was not so. The river here was known as the Strule; ten miles further down at Newton-Stewart it was the Mourne, even as far, I believe, as Strabane; nor was it till you began to get in the vicinity of the City of Londonderry that the river came into its own and took on its proper name of Foyle. But we were now not entirely new to Ireland, so one was prepared to accept anything that came along without registering too great astonishment.

Any and every sort of fishing was there for the asking, within a few miles of the town. Little streams, deep, sluggish, swift, shallow; big streams; the river itself, deep, broad, sluggish, often far too broad to get a fly to the further bank; away down at Newton-Stewart, broader, shallower; swift, rippling reaches where, standing in mid-stream, the longest cast would fall short of either bank.

Half the males of the town seemed to fish. The opening of the season found the banks simply lined with them, all throwing a fly, and a jolly good fly, too. Rich man, poor man, jarvey, cobbler—they were all hard at it. The water, too, about this time was full of dogs—dead ones, I should say. It was an unpleasant side-light, and for the life of me I couldn't explain it. Yet, it was only that the licensing season was coming round, and one-year-old dogs had got to go. It was all quite easy. A dog a year, free, and then into the river wid' him. A pleasantly economical aspect of the case, but not frightfully humane.

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But, reverting to the owners of the dogs, I must say it filled me with no small wonder, having been brought up in a notoriously poaching district, to watch an individual, as near an approach as could be possible to the kind of tramp one meets in any ordinary English lane, intent upon the water and casting as cunning a fly as you could possibly wish to see.

It was, of course, the wet fly, and my knowledge of this type of fishing was practically nil. I had recourse to the local fly-tier. He was an elderly, grey-haired individual with a terrific brogue, and he definitely and unconcealedly turned me down as completely beneath his notice from the word go. It was fortunate I was paying for the tackle I obtained from him, or else I don't think he'd have been bothered even to serve me. Later on, we became great friends, when he discovered me *catching* fish, and fine ones at that, when most of his compatriots had put their rods away. Indeed, I'd find him dashing after me down the street, when I happened to pass his way on return from a day's fishing, to get me to stop and let him see what fly I'd been using. For he was a great fisherman himself, and the finest and cheapest tier of flies I have ever met. Before he'd done with me I think he must have got a copy of every fly in my repertory.

But, for the moment, he was very aloof, on the borderland of politeness, one might call it. But he condescended to make me up a couple of casts, three flies on each. And what casts! They'd have held a salmon. I was inclined to demur, but catching sight of his face, turned and fled. And so set forth and tried my luck—and jolly poor luck I found it. The river ran bank-high everywhere, it carried a

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good head of spume and drifting logs, never the sign of a rise anywhere. As I said before, I was new to the ways of wet-fly fishing. I didn't seem able to find any one willing to put me wise. It had me beat. I gave it up. I'd wait till the water got into more of a state I knew, had fined down a bit. Then I'd try my luck again.

I'd no sooner made up my mind than a Depot sergeant came back with a bag of half a dozen fine trout. He murmured "Newton-Stewart," but that was all he would let out. At the same time, one or two of the Inniskillen officers were beginning to bring home the odd fish or two. The Depot doctor, too, a tubby little ex-major of R.A.M.C. talked of prodigious bags, not that he ever exhibited them. But I was bitten.

Next day I set forth on my bike for Newton-Stewart, a fair push against a biting wind with its ten miles of bumpy road. It was my first visit, and it distressed me to find the river here most appallingly wide. Still, despite the briskness of the wind, the fish seemed unaffected thereby, for the surface was fairly alive with rising trout. My heart leapt at sight of it; the first time I'd seen so much as the sign of a fish.

I began full of good hope, but that was quickly dashed. Cast as I would, not for the life of me could I get a fish to look at my fly. I changed to my other cast. Equally ineffective! I rigged up a cast of my own, 3x, a March Brown and a Black Palmer. Still no use. I tried every fly in my box I could think of, and still no good.

A nice fish was rising regularly, merrily, and just out of my reach. Time and again I tried him. Could I but catch him I might get an indication from him

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what was doing. But each time my fly was about to pass over his nose an eddy took it and swirled it far away out of his reach. I was half of a mind to go in as I was, shoes, stockings and all. It was too tantalising, and I still with that confounded sergeant's bag fresh in my mind's eye. I tested the water with my hand. That decided me, quite definitely. Not for any fish in the world was I going to be had for a mug in that icy water.

A local happened along in waders. He'd got a very similar tale to tell. I indicated my fish. Would he have a go? He would. In he waded. Got the beggar at first cast on a nondescript fly to which I could give no name under the sun. He was as surprised as I. A couple of minutes later, after an exhilarating fight, we landed between us a beautiful two-pound brown trout.

Together we bent over it, intent on opening it up and finding out, if possible, what it had been gulping down so voraciously. But no need, for there in its gorge was a mass of tiny beetles, the tiny, sheeny-green beetles you find at certain times of the year in moorland country clustering thick among the dandelion blossoms. And looking closer at the water now, one could see it dotted thick with the wretched little things. We parted company, but not before I'd wheedled one of those queer flies out of him. Perhaps, I hoped, there was something in them which resembled a beetle. But it proved a lamentable failure and merely caused me to surmise there was more of good luck than guidance which had brought that fish to shore.

That evening, and far into the night also, I laboured to produce something in the nature of a beetle, by aid of a concoction of green silk, worsted, and a good

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deal of bad language: for I'd never before tried my hand at tying a fly, nor ever again since. I wonder if I'd ever have the patience. Maybe one day, when I find time hanging heavy, I'll have another shot.

I returned to the river next day full of hope. But though the fish were rising just as fast as ever, and the little green beetles still coming down in their swarms, divil a bit of use were my home-made beetles. No sooner did they touch water than they became water-logged and sank like stones.

Ah, me! Had I but known! *The cock-a-bondy!* The incident passed into oblivion—till, happening to mention it to my father one day in the course of an after-dinner smoke, he at once asked: “But didn’t you try a cock-a-bondy?” And that was it! I’ve no doubt it was the answer—that pretty little gauzy, green-bodied fly—a ruddy beetle! Who’d have known it? But next time I, for one, will. Not twice will I be caught out like that.

All this time the river was slowly falling, the thickness beginning to disperse. More fish were steadily coming to the surface for their food. I remember, about this time, setting forth one squally day, hopeful the wind might drop, but finding myself instead fishing in the teeth of an ever-rising gale. It was still early spring and the trees were only yet in bud, though showing hopefully, and the river bank went *squelch! squelch!* as I made my way slowly along it. But failing dismally to rise a fish of any sort, I betook me at length to a sheltered nook where mossy bank rose high above the troubled stream, and there set me to light a pipe.

And sitting thus, bored and disconsolate, and becoming colder and colder every moment, for the

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wind had a nasty cold snap in it and even my nook failed to keep it out, suddenly it seemed to me that out in the midst of that wind-swept stream there had been something very much in the nature of a rise.

I crept down and, none too hopefully, cast a blue upright whereabouts I had seen that widening circle . . . in my dreams; for such indeed it seemed to be, and as I expected, the fly, hard driven in swirling gale, passed jerkily and unheeded by. I tried another cast—and yet another—and then, *there he was—and I was into him*. Three minutes later there was a fine little pound and a half brown trout lying in the slushy grass at my feet.

Greatly elated, I clambered back to my eyrie on the bank, and lit my pipe anew. If there was one fish foolish enough to be on the surface on a day like this, surely there might be two. It was worth giving it another chance, for the water was deep and broad here, hard at the entrance of a mighty pool where the river bent sharply back and the bank rose high and tree-hung above it. But I must say I had no particularly high hopes; and so was not only gratified, but considerably surprised to notice, not ten minutes later, what was obviously another rise, some thirty yards further down the river, and right at the very entrance of the great pool itself.

Again I crept down and again I cast. But this time the fly had scarce touched the surface before I was in to this one hard—and a big 'un too, for my reel went off with a soul-piercing screech. For a wild moment the line tore madly away, and I trembled for a kink. Then, like lightning, and before I could recover a yard, he'd turned and was hard back on his tracks. The line went slack and sagging in the wind. Lord!

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I thought he'd gone. But no! A dozen yards furiously reeled in and suddenly I felt the weight of him again.

And now he contented himself with swimming slowly and in wide circles out in the depths of the pool. I hung on grimly, fearful of the rush, when it came, towards the bank whereon I stood, for giant roots and timber pile lay everywhere, and little hope was left for me if once he got in amongst them.

It must have been a good five minutes I'd played that fish, and still he stayed deep down at the bottom of the pool, and still not so much as a glimpse had I caught of him. And then, suddenly and in a moment, the woeful thing I'd been fearing happened. From the deep of the pool, where at my very feet somehow I'd managed to keep him clear of snags, he went off suddenly and like an arrow, straight for the over-hanging branches of a giant oak half-fallen in the water. It was touch and go, and I knew it. My only hope was to hold him. I gave him the butt. The rod bent like a sapling. For a wild moment the line held—then it came back to me, whipping me sharply in the face. . . .

Another of my great fish gone!

I threw my rod on the ground. I could have wept. I felt like walking round killing people. Such a fish!—he couldn't have been an ounce under six pounds, and to lose him thus after so great a struggle, and he almost mine . . . !

There must be some terrible big fish in these waters. But they're very shy, cannibals. You don't often get them on a fly. I fished all one summer evening for one feeding in a ripple, and I shouldn't care to venture his size. One moment his great

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nose was showing, next the span of mighty tail, the water was so shallow. Everywhere the air was swarming with a myriad of tiny, white-winged, white-bodied flies. Frequent gusts of wind blew them in showers on to the water. He was obviously greedily after them, taking them down in gulps. I tried him with every fly I'd got with me, but as much use to offer a stone, which, as a matter of fact I did, as hard as I could let him have it, before I went away.

One of my sergeants, an absolute novice, did actually catch one of these great fellows—on a tiny blue dun, of all things. I can but think it must have been doing this gulping business and accidentally got the dun entangled amidst one of the gulps, for it was a cannibal fish of the worst, all head and no body, four pounds when it should have been a dozen, a horrible ugly brute, and no pleasure to look at at all.

These north Irish fish take a bit of catching. You have to strike like knife. Brought up on southern English waters where a snatched strike was lost fish, it took a bit of getting used to. Time and again I'd find the fly come away without so much as a touch. It was a subaltern of mine, a boy called Rendell, a fine angler and as fine a youngster as you could possibly have wished to meet, who put me wise to it in the end. Scarce six months later he met an untimely, though gallant end on the Aisne, and of all the many friends I lost thus, he was the one I mourned the most.

But, watching him one day, I marvelled that he didn't break his line every time he struck. But it gave me the clue. Thereafter it was comparatively child's play. Moreover, the river was beginning to

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fine down and lose some of its muddy colour. I have memories of going into the Mess one glorious sunny morning in early May, and finding the little Major doctor busy with an early morning rouser, in the shape of a tankard of beer. I bade him good morning and gave it my humble opinion that here at last was a day when every fish in the river should be moving.

“Moving!” he repeated, aghast, and nearly swallowing his tankard. “Ach, begorrah, me bhoy, ‘tis putting ye’ rod away instead ye may be doing!” Which, apparently, was exactly what all the local fishermen of the district seemed to be doing, for from this time onwards seldom did I meet another fishing beside myself and my youthful subaltern. So maybe, I thought, the Major was right. “Have a wee one?” said he; which I did.

But he duly turned out to be wrong, and I fear we made the little man squirm when he beheld the dish of trout young Rendell produced from the Mess larder next day for his beholding. For we’d found the water fairly alive with rising fish and a miraculous day it turned out to be. At first I stuck patiently to my old friend the blue upright, for I’d found it a wonderful killing fly; but to my discomfort found it of little avail to-day.

I don’t remember ever before having seen an alder actually swimming on the water. I’ve found him on the bank and know him well. But remarking at length what at first I’d thought to be an odd bee or two fallen upon the water, but which after a while I came gradually to realise were far too numerous for this (being indeed now cutting merry little waterways all over the water); moreover, noting that it was obviously this that the fish were after, I began to

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wonder whether maybe it was an alder after all—and duly changed my fly.

And, indeed, it was the alder and, although somewhat late with it, my bag was getting considerably heavier than I cared for before that remarkable hatch was over. Never shall I forget my young subaltern's face when I got home, nor the ill-concealed smugness of him—for it was obvious he thought he had me beat—as he made tender inquiries after my bag; nor his slight crestfalleness as he helped me to lay it out, nine beautiful fish, the largest just under two and a half pounds, the smallest comfortably over the pound. The queer thing about it, however, was the similarity between our bags. Indeed, fish for fish, they were identical, save that my biggest was an ounce or two the heavier. But that was what it was we had to show to our little Irishman, and for a moment I think he was half of a mind to accuse us of poaching.

I was out with my Company training the following day. We had access to a charming little estate called Rash, an ideal bit of manœuvre ground, and placed at our unlimited disposal by its kindly owner. Rich pasture land, rising and falling in gentle cadence; the song of the lark everywhere; wide open meadows, broken now and again by tiny copse of spruce and fir; here a herd of grazing cattle, an old bull, white and brown in his little paddock, nosing fretfully; there, away down in the lower ground, the river, deep and broad, meandering slowly, peacefully along, wondrous pools and shady reaches.

We had a ten-minute break in operations and having nothing better to do strolled down to the river, young Rendell and I, to see if, perchance, anything were doing. And, coming to sunny bank, found to our

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consternation a river covered with scudding fly and positively alive with rising fish.

Which was asking too much of human nature. Operations were immediately suspended, a delighted Company ordered home, whilst we two, on bicycles purloined from the Signal Squad, pushed for barracks at the greatest speed we were able to knock out of those unwieldly things. Followed a helter-skelter change, a packet of biscuits and bar of chocolate stuffed hurriedly into coat pocket, and within an hour of leaving Rash I was hard at it down by my favourite pool—the one where I'd lost the big 'un.

Unfortunately that terrific hatch was nearly over and the fish showing signs of repletion. Yet the rise went on. Within a couple of hours I'd got half a dozen nice trout of about a pound or so each. Incidentally I lost a couple, for, placing them for greater convenience carefully concealed beneath an adjacent hedge, when I came to look for them again, lo and behold! two were missing. And I can only place it to the account of rats—for surely a two-legged robber would have taken the lot?—though I'd never heard of rats playing this trick before, nor has it ever happened to me since.

But having filled my bag sufficiently, and getting a trifle bored with these small ones, I set my attention upon a fish who took roaming and zigzag course about the great pool, and leisurely and indifferently, with slow and steady suck golluped down the busy, scudding alders. I tried for a while to make him out, but that was impossible, for this peaty water is not like the gravel and chalky streams of England and, indeed, never once do I remember seeing anything beyond the rise, or momentary showing of great snout or tail, of any fish in these waters. But from his manner of

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doing, the quiet, deliberate suck with which he took the flies, it was very obvious he was a fish worth the catching. I'd got to have him, somehow! The lesser fry could go hang.

And at first it seemed an easy thing. The path of a roaming trout, if he be rising freely, is not hard to follow. Given a couple of rises or so in fairly quick succession, it should not be very difficult to place a fly ahead of him with comparative accuracy. Or so I thought, as I crept down to a comfortable-looking place from which to commence operations. But that fish, like so many of his kind, was a positive devil. Never once did he seem to take a sequence of flies on the same beat. I'd watch him suck down a couple of flies: One . . . Two . . . *Pop!* would go my fly, nicely, three or four feet ahead—a moment's hopeful pause, and there he was—right away off at some totally different angle.

I must have fished for that trout for a good hour. It became so irritating, at length, and such a terrible waste of time, that I was on the point of giving in. One more chance he should have and then be damned to him! He'd just taken a couple of flies right close in under the bank, a dozen paces away from where I crouched. Three feet ahead of the last one my fly cocked itself up beautifully, right in his very path. It was absurd. He simply couldn't miss it. No more he did, for suddenly, with a sober little suck, my fly had gone. Heart in mouth, I struck, and in a moment I was into him. Down went my rod top, with a terrific screech the line fairly tore itself off the reel. I was in to him good and proper this time!

He might almost have been the very same big 'un I'd missed in the very same spot on that chilly, wind-swept afternoon. For a moment I thought he was—

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or a brother. He employed almost exactly the same tactics. But after a very little while I realised it couldn't be. He was a biggish fish, but he hadn't the same weight to him. Twice he went perilously nigh to that sunken tree, twice I gave him the butt, twice the straining line held true. And then he began to come to me.

He was nosing around now in small circles at my feet, for the bank rose sheer here, a good two feet above the deep of the pool. I could see him, too, a beautiful, long, speckled creature, and it behoved me not to be losing time if I was to get him. He was far from played out yet, but I felt I'd better risk it. One has to where big fish are concerned. It is generally neck or nothing.

Gently sliding the net into the water, I began to draw him steadily to me. He answered to the increasing pressure splendidly. He came over the net like a perfect gentleman. In a second I had lifted, for a moment he sagged across the rim, my heart came to my mouth, then his great head went slithering in, a heave, and there he was, kicking and floundering on the bank beside me, a beautiful three-pounder to the ounce.

That was a wonderful pool. I shouldn't like to say the number of fish I got out of it. And yet there was a time when I didn't care very much about fishing it. For, high up on top of the ridge on the other side of the river was the Lunatic Asylum; and in between it and the river a loony gardener, who tilled the fields with various others; but who, at intervals, would descend to the water edge and there intimate to me darkly, and in a hissing whisper, with a good deal of waving fists, that he was going to murder me.

On the first occasion I must say that, being uncer-

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tain: (*a*) of how deep the water was, (*b*) whether he could swim, and (*c*) whether he really did intend to have a go at me or not, on that occasion, and until I gained some confidence by dint of custom, I must say I felt odd creepy chills go sliding down my back. It really was rather creepy to have this ungainly and unpleasant creature come leering down to within scarce thirty yards or so of water separating us, waving a threatening fist and breathing deeply: "I'll murder you! I'll murder you!" Just that, nothing more, but sufficient. In course of time I got to realise it was more in the nature of an incantation than anything else, but for all that, I couldn't help wishing he wouldn't be quite so persistent. The moment I arrived down he'd come. Still, in the end I got quite used to him. In fact, if he hadn't come I think I'd have quite missed him. It never failed to give a bit of a thrill.

So July came, and with it, hot, scorching days and the river now really far too fine and glassy except for the late evening rise. The political aspect, on the surface at least, was unchanged. But things were getting no better; indeed, they were obviously going from bad to worse. A tension such as this—two hostile bodies arming and drilling in the same field almost—must come to a head sooner or later. That ghastly vampire, Civil War, strained at its leashes. How much longer, one wondered, would they stand the strain?

And then came the big gun-running incident. As far as I remember, the Northern Irish Tennis Tournament was in progress at the Omagh Tennis Club—I may be wrong, for I have no diary to refer to, and memory plays false tricks at times, but I have vague recollections that that was so. At any rate, it was

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something which, on surface at least, gave rise to every member of our little Mess being bidden to dine at one or other of the big houses of the neighbourhood.

I always remember the incident particularly, because first of all, though rather tired as the result of an abortive day's fishing and hopeful of an early bed, under no circumstances whatsoever was it permitted to bid *adieu* till well into the small hours of the morning; and secondly because, as I pushed wearily home on my bicycle, I was rather baffled, if not uneasy, to meet at every corner or vantage point, such as bridge or road junction, a silent and watchful posse of men, or patrol. So that, though in no way molested or interfered with, I had a distinct sense of thankfulness when the solid gate of the Depot Barracks clanked comfortably behind me.

The following day brought explanation—at least, so far as rumour is able to be relied upon for fact. For rumour had it—and whence it came, or by whom, I have not the vaguest recollection—that an enormous quantity of arms and ammunition had been run by the Ulstermen in the course of the night. Hence the orderly patrols. Hence the over-prolonged hospitality. It was then, too, that we made the discovery that no single one of us had been permitted to leave our appointed place of hospitality till approximately the same hour—that was, I suppose, until such time as it was scheduled that the passage of arms should be through.

I only give this story, and its suggested explanation, from a point of interest and for what it is worth. As I have said, the only foundation for this latter, so far as I know, is based on rumour. So that, whether it be fact or fiction, even now I am unable to say. All I know is that, if the former, one finds it hard which to

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admire the more; whether the remarkable perfection at Ulster Headquarters in the taking note of so small a detail in the elimination of risk to her well-laid schemes; or the ingenious procedure of what really fell little short of the temporary kidnapping of certain officers of His Majesty's Garrison in Ireland.

CHAPTER VII

THE WAR

IT seems queer, but memory of how that drear catastrophe came upon me is strangely hazy. I think the vague shadow of its approach became perceptible towards the end of July—not so long after the gun-running incident to which I have just referred—and it came in odd, unheard-of, and quite incredible rumours. There were so many of them in those days that one never knew really quite what to make of them. I think we felt they were one and all mixed up in this Ulster trouble, that it was all a sort of dust-in-the-eye, put-you-off-the-scent business, that the Irish mine was really about to go up at last. Facts, too—the historic assassination at Serajevo. . . .

Then, sudden orders to stand by to return to Mullingar. That sounded more ominous of war! Could hardly be the Ulster business if we were on the eve of departure. Followed mutterings. Threats. Ultimatums. . . . Orders to entrain. Leave stopped. Rumour rampant. European armies mobilising . . . German declaration of war on Russia . . . German declaration of war on France . . . Belgium. . . . *We, too, were at war!*

That last evening at Mullingar! Never shall I forget it—the dim outline of the barracks, the grey square in the fading light of an August eve, line upon line of piled rifles, a subdued excitement everywhere;

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groups of officers here, clumps of men there, lying about, standing about, silent, chattering, laughing. . . . The sudden blare of the bugle, shattering the quiet shadows—the “Fall in.” . . . Silence. . . . A sharp word or two of command. . . . The low sound of steadily marching feet. . . . Ireland knew us no more. . . .

That brief picture stands out alone, clear and vivid. The rest is mixed and uncertain, vague and indistinct as are the remainder of those early days—all save one other occasion, the moment when, out in the open, no cover near, I heard for the first time the ominous crack of a bullet—*Crack!—Crack!*—close, menacing, deadly, all around me. . . .

All day long we had dug in, a second line, they said, for the troops out on the Canal line to fall back upon if required. And as we dug, at first only the distant, low boom of guns from the Canal zone. The war seemed still unreal, very far away. Behind us in the town, Mons, the church bells were ringing. It was Sunday—a queer Sunday! People were going to church. . . .

A terrifying, soul-shattering shriek from the blue! Terrible, relentless, right into the midst of the platoon I was leading to their digging ground, a ground shrapnel burst with shattering explosion. Only a ranging shot, undirected against us individually. Infernal coincidence! Three men on the ground. Blood! . . . We collected again—bandages—a stretcher—started to dig in. More shrapnel—dug on—felled trees. A couple of aged cottagers came and wept as we laid axe to three lordly poplars. We desisted a moment. It seemed rather awful. . . . *Sh-h-h-riek!—Crash!* Right in the middle of us. The poor old lady hit in the arm—a flesh wound only,

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thank God! Two of my men. . . . Another shrieking crash! . . . We scattered. Other thoughts. Other deeds. Those lordly trees for the time—saved. . . .

We dug on. The odd joke, jerky laughter. More shrapnel! We wondered. The Canal? That wonderful line of defence. The Hun was registering in earnest. What of it? Was he then across? On we dug . . . cleared the foreground. . . .

Rumours coming in now. Word from our covering troops—blue-grey uniforms in the distance . . . a column in fours . . . a sudden distant crackle of musketry. One of my sergeants spoke: "Them men up there ain't ours," he said, and I, too, laid my field-glasses upon the summit of that not-far-distant slag-heap. He was right. They weren't. It was no longer khaki up there. Tiny figures in blue-grey uniform flitted about that sharply silhouetted skyline. "Gawd!" said the Sergeant, "them's Germans, sir! . . ." Again he was right!

Evening drawing on. Darkness falling. Time to get those covering troops in. I met one of my men as I went out, a bullet through his arm. He was ambling along, smoking and cheerful, but obviously not sorry to be out of it. From what I could make out from him the enemy were dribbling in in their thousands. I could hardly credit it. Actually, as it turned out not so long afterwards, he was not so very far from the truth. But it behoved me to be hustling.

And then those bullets! . . .

Often afterwards, thinking back upon this incident, the strange, sudden realisation driven sharply home, the rather awfulness of it, the unreality, the newness, the strangeness of it, death staring one in the face, the uncertainty of it all—it makes me wonder. Such a

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minute grain of sand to what was yet to come—those few straying, haphazard bullets! First experience! The same to all?—to us, to those who were to come after? Was it? Was there not some difference, something deeper, sharper, more appalling in the newness, the unusualness, the untriedness of war; this so great war of mighty nations, of modern, terrific armaments, this first entry into it; something so stark and unthinkable—Peace—this lovely, peaceful, even now undisturbed country-side—War—destruction, horror, happy homes desecrated, misery—Death . . . ? Indeed, I feel these sensations, common to every one of us about to make our first entry into the battle ring, must have been accentuated for us, the first experimenters, professional soldiers though we were.

Thus Mons . . . the Marne . . . the Aisne . . . Ypres . . .

That terrible Salient! And yet a wonderful place. Great days indeed! Corinthian days, gentlemen's days—bullets, shells, bayonets—still un-debased by the foul forces yet to be let loose, bombs, grenades, gas, the stench of the graveyard everywhere. . . .

Gentlemen's days? Yet hardly, physically, that's to say. Even here, to what depths did we descend—for the moment to the level of the lower beasts. Are you who read this one of those who descended there, lost to the world, mentally renouncing all claim to share in the dear old world you knew and loved so well? That is how for four century-long weeks I, for one, lived in that incredible Salient. Beards descended upon us. At the end of a week men one had known intimately for years had become complete strangers, beyond recognition. It really made things rather difficult at times.

I even can't remember washing my hands once

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throughout the whole of that incredible period. A tiny stream did run nearby, but it was so chock full of filth, refuse, excreta and bodies that it might not have existed for all I, or most of us, cared. But, really, there was little time or facility for washing even had one wished it. There were no latrines. The whole back area was one profound latrine. One seldom took cover in process of some episode of conflict, which was daily, without lying in a nuisance. On one occasion I prevented, and by the skin of my teeth only, a bearded warrior from using the entrance of my dug-out in the early hours of the morning. I have no doubt he mistook it among the snowy slush and filth for an ordinary hole in the ground. Never shall I forget his look of astonishment as, in process of unbuttoning his great-coat, he became suddenly aware of my head protruding from the hole. "What the blazes are you doing there?" I said sternly. He blurred out something about "thinking of 'aving x x x x x," somewhat bellicosely, and still obviously preparing for business. "Then you — well go and have it somewhere else!" I retorted indignantly, and also preparing for action—of a different sort. He goofed at me a moment—a typical clod—then, suddenly realising, for the first time, apparently, that it was an officer with whom he held converse, made horrified dive for pack and rifle and incontinently fled. And I—well, what else could I do but laugh and hope for the best in the future?

And yet they *were* great days, tremendous, epoch-making! A queer camaraderie; quiet, great friendships between officers and men. Wonderful men, wonderful comrades! And the grim sordidness of it all, too—even that was, as witness above, seldom without its humour. I mind me of the boy—Dampier was his name—who, sent up to report to me in the

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front line one night, and being directed to take charge of a trench (and the line here was continuous and not to be mistaken, though somewhat camouflaged perhaps amid the bullet-felled spruces everywhere) scarce twenty paces beyond where my Company Headquarters lay, returned some ten minutes later (and goodness knows how!) to report that he had been unable to locate the front line; but had come to a trench, the occupants of which were wearing a sort of small, porkpie headgear unlike any he could remember having seen elsewhere. And, fortunately, misdoubting they might be Germans, had turned and fled and a following bullet or two to speed him on his way. I must own to being rather upset, and conducted him personally to his post after that; but however he came to step over a four-foot trench full of men, without spotting it or being spotted himself and stopped, is more than I can understand to this day.

I remember him particularly well for various reasons other than this minor incident. One, because for the life of me I could not remember his name, and so had recourse to such reference as "the young officer," "the officer who joined us yesterday," and so on; until on a somewhat plaintive—or, should I say, peevish: "Do you think, sir, you could possibly remember my name?" I took precaution to write it down in the fly-leaf of my notebook, and thereafter, being careful to refer to it when about to make contact, rectified my regrettable failure. I think one's memory was almost shot to hell about this time.

Again he stands out more clearly among the host of others, because he lasted for a full four days. My tragic average till then had been somewhere in the area of twenty-four hours, or less—either killed or duly returned wounded. We were never out of a scrap of

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sorts from one day to another. Bullets were thick as peas. One got so used to their playful idiosyncrasies—zitting through one's clothes without more inconvenience than sense of red-hot wire, snipping off a branch with a startling crack within an inch of one's ear, ponk into the ground at the very feet of one—that one hardly worried about them. The shells were different—to me at any rate. I never managed to get used to them. Our part of the front line must have been rather hard to shell, so that we seldom got more than bullets. I almost preferred it to the support line, because there we were always getting shelled to blazes.

So that, even being sent back into Brigade Reserve for twenty-four hours' respite didn't seem to be altogether jam. The headquarters were situated in Beukenhorst Château (better known in the later years of the War as Stirling Castle). It was devilishly cold. Snow lay thick everywhere. General Gleichen, a kindly Brigadier, sent for me to partake of tea with him and his Staff. I felt rather ashamed because of my disreputable kit and my beard, which, apart from being rather long and dirty, was somewhat matted with blood by reason of a splinter of bullet in the cheek which, early in the period, had splashed off the foresight of a rifle a few feet away from me.

It was a memorable tea for me because it was the first with anything hot in it I'd had for days, weeks almost. There was a lovely cake. It belonged to the Staff Captain. It had arrived by post along with a fine new pair of riding-breeches. But I never had any of that cake. Hardly had we started the meal when an unpleasantly big shell came along. "By jove!" said the General, "I believe that hit the roof! I'm going out to see." We followed him out, equally inquisitive

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—I perhaps more so, being never too happy inside walls when shelling was toward.

The room was in the basement. A broad flight of stone steps led down to a passageway and took you to it. I was half-way along this passageway when there was a terrific explosion behind me, I was hurled forward, so was the General, half-way up the steps, his hat went for six straight through the open doorway, as one man we scattered for the woods. I made a bolt round the back of the château. As I got to the back of it another whistling crescendo, another nerve-shattering explosion, a dark shape somewhat in the nature of a black poplar tree rose at my feet, yet not so much as a pebble touched me.

I can assure you I was glad to be back in my little dug-out, where I found my young subaltern, Dampier, pleasantly fast asleep. I ascertained later that the second shell had exploded in the room almost as we left it. Only the Mess orderly was wounded, but that lovely cake and the Staff Captain's nice new breeches were never heard of again. I was sorry for the Staff Captain, but I really did regret that good cake. Had I only been a faster eater!

The Boche was very persistent that day. Hardly had I settled myself down in my dug-out than *whiz-z-bang!* right over our heads. Then another—and another—and, by gad! a fourth—all in the same straight line with us, and slowly creeping closer. Said I to young Dampier, “I don’t know what you feel about it, but if another comes along, we’ll be the next for it, and I’m off!” The words were hardly out of my mouth when the entrance was blown half in. Brushing the mud and slush from our eyes we bolted like a pair of scared rabbits. . . .

Later, the shelling over, we returned, somewhat

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mortified to find the Company Sergeant-Major, whose dug-out lay back to back with ours, sitting there snug and tight as the proverbial insect. "Quite safe after that last one!" he greeted me cheerfully, not to say a trifle smugly. I felt debased to the ground. He was right. You never get two ranging shells sitting down in the same hole—at least I never met one. One lives and learns! "Yes," I countered gloomily, "but you didn't get your front door blown in!" Which was all I could find to retort as I crept back into mine.

That night we celebrated, young Dampier and I. There were maconochies for ration. Eaten cold they're ghastly. Hot, well . . . I happened to have the remains of a couple of inches of candle I'd bought the night before for a couple of francs (1s. 9d.). I held it, Dampier balanced the maconochie over it. The smell of that heating mess slowly increased in intensity. It was too delicious for words. Hot stew! Mark you, there'd been no hot meal for a fortnight or more. Eventually we got it so hot that eating it was an absolute feast. So much so, that young Dampier, instead of following my lead and getting down to a good sleep, had to open up, heat, and eat another—about lukewarm, I should think from my memory of what remained of the bit of candle. Now a maconochie is a very rich affair, full of nutrition and fat. It was just one too nutritious for young Dampier. He packed up next day—gripe, pains in the stomach, something like that. I never saw him again. I was terribly sad he'd got to go. I'd got very fond of the boy—a gallant and cheerful lad; moreover, he'd lasted a whole four days!

Quite a lot of game lived in those woods. I never saw any actually alive, but going round the trenches

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one evening in the growing dusk I noticed upon a parapet a nicely trussed and skilfully prepared couple of birds. At first sight I took them for chickens, and was on point of asking for further enlightenment as to their antecedents. But, happening to notice at that moment some rather ominously long and pointed brown feathers nearby, bearing more association to an entirely different kind of bird, I thought it better to refrain and pass discreetly by. For I could not help but admire any man who, in the midst of so much death and destruction, was able to find appetite to prepare such dainty tid-bit, let alone be bothered to go and catch it.

Those were not the only additions to the pot which I came across. We had some very first-class poachers amongst our Bedford ranks. I remember an incident later when my company took over a bit of water-logged zone in the Messines area. The morning after completing the relief I was pleased to notice a couple of fine goats busily cropping just outside my dug-out. I got to know them very well, they were so friendly. Passing shells, whizzing just overhead, seemed to disturb them in no way. They became quite pets in Company Headquarters. I was rather glad of their presence. I felt the men liked to have them there, knowing full well the love that Thomas Atkins has for dumb creatures.

So that, missing them a few days later, and failing for a whole twenty-four hours to observe my old friends grazing there, I happened to make casual remark to my C.S.M., who, I must say, surprised me as much by his unexpected lack of interest—for he had always seemed in particular to show the greatest fondness for the animals—as by his somewhat callous dismissal of the subject: “Reckon they’ve been hit

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by a shell, sir," which, indeed, seemed not too unlikely under the circumstances.

But I must say, when the villainous fellow suggested to me later in the evening: "Could I do with a nice little shoulder of mutton?" and knowing full well that the day's ration was beef and no other, I must say I couldn't help suspecting that the tasty little meal dished up for me by the Company cook, and which I found awaiting me on my return from my evening rounds, was not entirely disconnected with the sudden disappearance of those two friendly, though smelly, beasts.

There was a tiny stream which coursed merrily through the Belgian village where we billeted one back area period. A little wooden-railed bridge crossed it just outside the farm-house which was our particular billet. One of my youngsters was a keen fisherman. We used to lean against the rails and ponder how nice it would be to put a worm under it—not, I think, that any trout lived there. It was really more the idea than anything else. For it was now May and gloriously warm and sunny, and it was fine to lean there and watch the dancing water and ponder upon it.

He was a fine youngster, scarce yet properly weaned to the battle zone, another of the long procession which is war—in the front line. Sometimes one joined in with it oneself and sometimes one just watched it going by. How many of these fine young fellows passed through my Company while I was with it I shouldn't care to hazard—who stayed—for a while; then went to join the others. It was not a theme to be brooded on. One just effaced it—tried not to think upon it. It was too terribly sad. . . .

I remember this boy particularly well because of a

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certain night. We lay in reserve, muddy trenches and dug-outs, at the back of Givenchy. We were due to go over on the morrow. To-night we must try and get a bit of sleep. Sleep means fitness. Unfit men are no use in the firing line.

But sleep was practically impossible. The guns wouldn't let us. We were all jammed in among their zone. It was their job to see that the Boche didn't get mending his wire. How could one sleep? On the verge of dropping off—*Bang! . . . Crash!* just overhead—and again—*Crash! . . . Bang!* and really it was almost useless to think of trying to go to sleep.

But towards midnight I must have sort of dozed. . . . I was as good as off, for I'm a terrible sleeper, and it takes more than a few guns to keep me permanently awake if I really want to sleep. At that moment a voice spoke from the darkness. "I say—Skipper . . . ?" it said, and I could have killed the fellow. It woke me right up. "Yes!" irritably. Given another minute and I must have been clean off. Damn the boy! "What d'you want?" He rolled over on to an elbow. I could see the outline of his head silhouetted against the sharp flash of a gun. "Have you been to sleep, sir?"—"No, I haven't!" He sighed. "Nor've I. . . . D'y'ou hear that bloody bird?"

Bird be damned! I listened intently. No, I didn't . . . at least—ye-es—I'd got it! A ruddy nightingale, warbling faintly away in the distance. "If only the bally thing would stop I think I could get a little sleep," he gave out indignantly. He rolled over on his other side and, having unburdened himself thus, slept. So, at last, did I. Poor fellow, he was blown to bits next day.

Such is war—but what's to help it? We've got to

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fight. That's Nature's law. Survival. Inviolable! And that survival, when all else has failed—and failed it has in the past and fail it will most assuredly in the future—is *by fighting*. And pray God Britain has not, nor ever will, cast off lusty heritage passed down to their sons and their sons' sons by burly forebears—the readiness to fight if need be, the indomitable will to see it through to the bitterest of ends.

I apologise for this digression. It was scarcely intended. I had apportioned a couple of pages and behold it is a dozen. Yet it had been hard to exclude it altogether. There was little of sport in this great war, no packs of foxhounds as in the Peninsular, little of glamour, little of aught save Death. But in all its discomfort, its pain, its squalor, its unutterable tragedy, to us of the front line there was much of splendour, good-comradeship, courage, of unimaginable bravery. To many of us, while they lasted, they were great days indeed.

CHAPTER VIII

INDIA

IT is a far cry from Messines to Baluchistan, yet autumn of nineteen-twenty found me there, in a smallest of small four-roomed bungalows in Quetta, all among thirty others of identical size and description, brick walls and tin roofs, thick with dust; row upon row in their arid little apologies for gardens.

For the Staff College lived there. Also a Commandant, to whom one paid the greatest deference, and who addressed you always as "my friend." An irritating expression, but being, no doubt, of the essence of greatness, one to be borne with. For all great men to have some little foible, idiosyncrasy, call it what you will—Mr. Baldwin, his pipe; Mr. Churchill, his hat; Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Maxton, their hair; Johnny Douglas, his umbrella; Ronald Coleman, his moustache—and I suppose that a Commandant of the Staff College may be considered a great man, and therefore equally so entitled.

I had the honour of dining with him one night, in due process of custom and roster. The ladies having retired, I found myself, to my secret discomfiture, seated on one side of him. But, mindful of the honour, and true to the ethics of the budding staff officer, though by nature indisposed that way and of

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limited conversation, I set myself to be as ingratiating as possible to the great man.

"A fine port this of yours, sir," I ventured humbly, profoundly wishing I could tender some more succulent form of sop, but finding none.

His suave blue eyes turned upon me pityingly. "My friend," he said, "don't you know there is *no* good port in India?"

Crushing! No doubt I'd asked for it. No doubt I grinned inanely. It's all part of the game. One day you'll probably find others trying it on you in your turn. But what fun it would have been to have answered somewhat of what was in one's mind—"I know there isn't, and what I said was only a platitude and I do wish, like a good fellow, you'd not call me 'my friend'." Wouldn't it have been a joke? And yet, as any one knows, the first part would have been exceedingly bad manners, and the second—well, there it is! You just can't do that sort of thing—which, no doubt, is just as well.

Did you ever go to the White City, with its brown, cardboardy-looking hills? That's what Quetta looks like, or perhaps I should say, Baluchistan. You crawl out of Karachi by the evening mail, and you scurry across a hot and sandy plain, and twenty-four hours later you reach Sibi. And there you take on another engine—at the back of you, and immediately begin to crawl up into what at first sight would appear to be a range of completely inaccessible mountains.

And as you climb, suddenly you find the air beginning to get cooler. Suddenly the green-grey of the plains turns to a stolid brown, the straight, endless course of the railway line to the zigzag of a twisting snake, half naked, undersized bodies to imposing

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figures heavily swathed from head to toe. A tall policeman, armed with long rifle and bandolier, stands among them, nonchalant and at ease; the peace of the plains has given way to the sturdy unrest of the hills. And so on—*chug! chug! chug!*—up the steep incline, rumbling along over great bridges, tiny bridges, leaping torrents, crawling in giant spirals round mighty clefts in mountain-side; on and ever on, up and ever up—a thousand feet . . . two . . . six. . . . You've arrived. . . .

Suddenly the frantically puffing engines seem to go silent, suddenly the landscape begins to slip more swiftly and more swiftly by. And now you are running smoothly and fast through a level, sandy valley. Here and there a cluster of tiny, dome-shaped huts, a string of camels loping along, a flock of grazing sheep and goats, half a dozen ragged urchins waving. Slowly green field begins to take the place of brown. Suddenly the valley has broadened. Lean out now and look. There, away in the distance, is Quetta, a verdant carpet outspread against its towering background of brown, and all about you a fresh and glorious atmosphere, intoxicating almost after the dull and arid breath of the sun-scorched plains.

I regret to say my first arrival was connected with a rather uncomfortable incident. We were accompanied by a terrible amount of luggage, everything, indeed, that my wife and I possessed. On arrival at Karachi we were met by one of the usual accommodating agent people. He eyed the piled heap of luggage thoughtfully, checked off the pieces. Was it to accompany us? It would cost a great deal of money. I shrugged my shoulders. He murmured "goods." I shook my head. No—not a hope! Somehow or other it had got to go on the train with us. He grew more thoughtful still. Scratched his head. In a

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confidential whisper intimated perhaps I should prefer to leave it to him? New as I was to the country it would have been difficult to misread his meaning. Well—what of it? Let him get on with it! We had heard a thing or two of the East.

He met us again later, conducted us to our comfortable coupé—a most efficient and accommodating individual!—the baggage was in, handed me my tickets, a buff baggage-slip, a mysterious something about “half price.” Staggering! Largesse? He smiled amicably, widened his arms. How much? Again the spread of arms. I pressed. He made suggestion. I paid—sufficiently heavily, it came to me on later reflection. But I was grateful. I was still well up on the deal. A whistle blew. The platform, its smells, its noisy hordes, its filthy mass of beggars, slid away. We were off.

Arrived at Quetta, I set about locating this precious luggage of mine, but hadn’t gone a couple of dozen yards when I could have sworn to hearing mention of what sounded extraordinarily like my name. The sound seemed to come from the mouth of a fat and oily little individual, obviously of the railway from his uniform, in company with the Guard, an equally obviously newly opened telegram in his hand. Uneasy memory stirred; of course imagination, but best to be assured. I accosted him. Yes, he had, indeed, that very minute, received from Karachi a telegram to re-weigh the baggage of a certain Major Somebody, arriving by same train.

Cold, wiggly, crawly things crept down my spine. Horrors! What a dreadful situation! I was in the soup! What could I do? What would *they* do? Put me in jug? A jolly way of introducing oneself to the Staff College! “Defrauding His Majesty’s Exchequer”—

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and so on, and so on . . . ! Only one thing to do. Put a bold face on it and hope for the best.

"I am that Major Somebody," I said, trying to look haughty and producing a narrow and somewhat crumpled slip of buff-coloured paper. "This is what the agent gave me at Karachi. That is all I know about it." Head in air, I stalked majestically away. It worked. It did the trick.

It was regrettable—there must have been a mistake! The baggage, indeed, weighed just double. But if the Major Sahib . . . ? I stuffed rupee notes into the infernal fellow's hand. The Major Sahib would most certainly . . . ! We parted on the lowest terms of mutual recognition, my pockets still lighter by just that amount already paid for my luggage at Karachi, plus the extra emoluments incidental to the amicable settlements at either end. It was a harrowing incident, but one which, under the circumstances, I really felt I'd got out of rather well.

I never tried it again. It was, indeed, suggested to me all right by another agent on the selfsame platform. I shook my head. Conscience? Funk? I don't know. Whatever it was, I was travelling light, and it wouldn't have mattered one way or the other. But I couldn't help twitting him lightly on the other incident. Which to my surprise he took quite seriously, remarking only that it was obvious that other agent had been unwise enough to *risk not tipping the ticket inspector*. Ye gods! So that was it? The dirty dog! What a country! Self-government. . . . My aunt . . . !

First acquaintance with those dingy, brown, sun-baked hills strikes a not altogether pleasant chord. They are really rather terrific! You begin to wonder gloomily how ever on earth you are going to exist among anything quite so grim. But only for a while.

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With remarkable quickness you get acclimatised to them. They seem to sort of grow upon you. Why, it is difficult to say. Maybe it is the very vastness of them which appeals, the sheer, rugged nature of them, the fine, masculine type of race which inhabits them. Maybe it is the wonderful shooting you can get amongst them. From all quarters one heard tell of it. One thrilled. Here, at last, it would seem, one had tumbled headlong into the very paradise of all one's dreams.

But it did not take long to discover the fly in the ointment. It was obviously no place for the novice. The experts nodded their heads, told tales. That was where it rested. Occasionally we ate of their harvest, but whence that harvest came, not a word, not so much as a suggestion. Again they nodded their heads, wisely. They knew. That was their affair.

Later, when I came to swell their ranks, a certain incident caused me to sympathise. I happened, in a most unlikely spot, upon a wonderful head of sisi, a type of tiny hill partridge, and I really do believe nobody but myself knew anything of it. One day I took a friend out with me. We did very fairly well. Not so long afterwards, going out by myself again, to my disgust I encountered hardly a single bird; which surprised me, because there'd been any quantity we'd not even fired a shot at on the previous occasion. Some time later I learnt the reason—from this very selfsame friend of mine. It seemed that, being greatly struck by his day's outing with me, he, with a goodly donkey-load of lunch and a party of guns, had gone off the following day and well and thoroughly cleaned it up. Of course such shooting is open to all, and there for anybody for the asking, but you've got to find it. And as I was the cove who'd found it I must say it

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seemed to me rather an unkindly manner of returning thanks for a good day's outing.

But when we first took to shooting our opening efforts were far from propitious. The first time my wife and I took our guns out and clambered laboriously in and out among those brown and arid mountains, and saw only an occasional linnet or hovering vulture, our return home was accompanied by spirits considerably damped. It seemed incredible that any living thing could possibly live there. Were, then, all these voluminous tales lies?

In course of time we began to learn that for serious shooting, or shooting at all, for that matter, the first essential was a car. But, apart from this, its absolute essentialness had forced itself sufficiently acutely upon us already. In a dirty tonga, back to back with a driver who'd all too obviously never had a bath in his life, and a pony that had equally obviously never had a straight meal off anything save green herb, the extravaganza of scent which encompassed one was at times positively overpowering; and the Staff College lay a good three miles from either Club or Town.

But cars were still at a prohibitive price. Even second-hand ones were hardly obtainable and, when they were, at a perfectly exorbitant price. On various occasions a nice little two-seater Chevrolet would go sliding by us on our journeys to and from the Club. We'd watch it with attentive eyes and sigh. It seemed to us, in our ambling, scent-laden tonga, the very acme of our requirements, the very height of all bliss. But what a hope! And yet, suddenly we were thrilled to learn that it was on the market, that the owner had had sudden orders for Home. We hurried to inquire the price. Three thousand five hundred rupees! It made one inclined to whistle. But there it was! Take it or

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leave it; and we'd got to have a car. It was too great a chance to miss. With the rupee standing at ten to the pound, I wrote a cheque for £350. Can you imagine it!—and a third-hand car, too, at that?

The owner was due for Karachi next morning. Would I come and collect it right away? Lordy! I'd never driven a car in my life before. That was a pity, but he could spare time to give me half an hour's lesson, and I'd be able to take it away with me. I wondered. But at the moment there was no alternative. So down I went—and returned an hour later complete with car, the which I drew proudly up outside the front door. For once in a way I really do believe my wife was very definitely impressed.

That night there was a dance at the Club. Having now got a car we'd obviously got to use it. So into it we got, and down to the Club we went—and came back, very successfully, and then we were faced with the garage door. The approach to it was on a jolly little incline and in the most delightful curve imaginable. Everything inside me urged me to put off the evil day. But it was freezing as only it can in Quetta and I'd heard enough of burst radiators. Neck or nothing, the wretched little thing had got to be got inside. I thought of all this as we got nearer—and nearer—and then I think I must have lost my nerve. Something seemed suddenly to go horribly wrong with the accelerator. We took the curve in admirable style on something akin to two wheels, and shot through the door like a scalded cat. Fortunately it was open as far as it would go. There was a splintering crash, a jerk, the steering-wheel whirred, shot out of my hands, we came to a dead stop, scarcely a couple of inches from the back wall. Luckily for us that crash must have accomplished three things—kicked my foot off the

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accelerator, stopped the engine, and put on the brake; though how it did it goodness alone knows, for I have no recollection whatsoever of taking part in any single one of the processes personally. The garage people very kindly came up and straightened out a bent front axle next day. It was an easy let off!

But my troubles were not yet entirely over, and it is remarkable, when you come to think of it, what you can do when you're really put to it. *Three days later I set out to pass on to my wife the few things I'd learnt about driving a car.* I have few recollections of quite how it was done, but at the end I was quite confident in my mind that a husband is *not* the best person in the world to take on this sort of thing. The few recollections I have are vivid in the extreme. They are a sort of mixed up, jumbling series of—"For God's sake!—I say, look out where you're going, old girl!"—"Well, you told me, didn't you? . . . You'd better take the beastly wheel yourself!—What was that?" "Left! . . . left—no, the other left!—Now de-clutch—well, shove the clutch home—no, no, *not* that! That's the brake!" Tears. Apologies. Try again. "Now then—spark retarded?—No, the spark—the spark, I say, not the petrol! No—not that handle! The other one!—Are you in neutral?"—"Of course I am!" (There's no self-starter to this contraption in four letters!) *Crank, crank, crank!* A hearty backfire! Language! Another backfire! More language! More tears. Another shot. Myself clinging desperately to the bonnet . . . ! Home. . . .

But to return to the chikhori, the first time I met that fine bird, the chikhori, was during an inspection of the Nushki line. As far as I remember this line was another of the little relics of the late War. It linked up, by way of Baluchistan, with Persia, and I have a

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remote idea it was connected with the Persian Cordon. But as it was still running (though in the slowest possible manner), and as we were responsible for that part between Nushki and Duzdap, and as there was numbered along it a considerable brotherhood of gentry whose ethics on the matter of other people's property were somewhat loose and primeval, a battalion of Indian infantry was disposed along its length for purposes of its defence and protection. And being now Brigade Major to the particular Brigade of which that unit formed a part, it fell to my lot to accompany my General whensoever he happened to feel disposed to carry out an inspection.

I only did it once, for, fortunately, soon afterwards the greater part of the line was handed over, with mutual felicitations, to our Persian neighbour; and jolly well rid of it we felt ourselves to be. And yet, I wouldn't have missed just that once for anything in the world. It was a quaint experience in its way. It took a full week to perform, the greater part of the journey being by train, slow, hot, tedious, dusty, boring to a degree. But the monotony was rudely broken some twenty-four hours before reaching Duzdap. At this point, and some eighty miles to the north of the line, lay a small and squalid village which went by the name of Khwash, and here, for reasons tactical, a Company of infantry was duly maintained and located. To get to it one went by Ford van across a more or less roadless desert, the road, so called, being scarcely even a track, little more indeed than an occasional ghostly demarkation in the nature of a double line of stones and boulders, frequently not even that.

It was a really horrible journey, the seats of that Ford van like iron. I did have a cushion of sorts but it was most inadequate. We were bumped and jerked about



*A good bag of chikhor.—
Baluchistan*

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to a degree almost inconceivable. Innumerable and sandy *nullahs* crossed our path. The car seemed to take an almost fiendish delight in sticking in most of them just as soon as it had got well into the middle. Out we had to get and push! Sometimes it was a question whether we'd ever get through or not. Once we passed a living volcano, flaming faintly away in the distance; and in that vast, silent wilderness there was something eerie almost about it, that dim, lonely, great mountain smouldering darkly away in the distance, like some mighty demon brooding wickedly there with head of flickering flame.

The last part of that incredible journey was done in darkness. I was quite beyond thinking or caring by the time our destination loomed out of those dark shadows. Dinner in the little Company Mess is lost upon me in oblivion; I suppose I ate and I suppose I drank; but just what, or how, or who was there, or what the food tasted like, no recollection remains with me whatsoever, save the deep admiration I felt for my youthful host, planted out there all on his own and holding with such cheerful spirit so god-forsaken and horrible a little outpost of Empire.

The return journey was not quite so bad. We were able to start in our own time. Four hours more of daylight were thus available. We paused for a half-way halt at a tiny village, scarce more than an odd hut or two, where a scanty rill ran and where chikhori were said to come and drink. A few came, and we frightened them away, and that was all. A wholly inglorious affair and we had no time to stay for more. But at least I'd had a look at that fine bird and my appetite was properly whetted for more.

But you can't think how glad I was to see the train again, grimy and dusty and smelly though it might be.

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Horse-hair cushions after that ghastly wooden seat were a joy undreamed of; the terrific *jolt, jolt, jolt!* of the wheels a positive lullaby. And yet we were better off by far than the luckless C.O. of the battalion who, visiting the detachment a few weeks later, had a big-end go clean through the crank casing of that self-same and identical Ford van, and came in the last thirty miles or so on the back of a camel. Even horse-hair didn't appeal to him. What he needed most was an air-cushion. Indeed, the camel's a terrible creature! You know how he came to be made? The Lord said unto Adam, "I seem to have been making everything, you may try your hand at just one thing." And Adam, having a shot at it, made the camel. A bit of a chestnut? But I, for one, hadn't heard it before.

The chikhor in appearance is somewhere between an English partridge and a grouse. His home lies away up among the mountains, alongside his jolly little friend the sisi. But he takes a rare bit of finding. In fact, all among these vast mountainous wastes, water is the only real clue to him. Once a day, at least, he must drink, preferably twice. A guaranteed water supply must, therefore, be available. Find that, and with any luck you've found him.

Three likely ways of getting that information suggest themselves: (*a*) from your friends and acquaintances—which is *nil*; (*b*) from maps—which are (or certainly were) not over reliable or carrying much detail; and (*c*) by legging it round the country-side and finding out for yourself. Which latter, combined with (*b*), is the obvious answer—if applied with care. For the greater part of the best shooting ground lies within tribal territory, where armed and not very respectable *badmashes* (robbers) have a nasty habit of roaming in search of any likely bits of trouble which

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come their way. And if you happen to be that particular bit of trouble, well, God help you! Not so long before I arrived in Quetta two British officers were caught like this, and a fairly stiff ransom extracted. And even during my short sojourn there a collision occurred between a small mobile column and a party of Afridi raiders, involving the untimely death of two British officers, and a considerable number of Indian rank and file killed and wounded, scarcely fifty miles from Quetta itself. Shooting parties in these districts had to be armed, the minimum being two rifles. That was the law. Indeed, you never knew what you might not run up against.

There's a lot of irony and a lot of luck in this sort of wild shooting. Two of us were out after chikhori one day. There'd been a lot of snow lately, and though now the sun was shining in an unbroken sea of blue, here on the upper slopes glinting patches of it showed white in the little hollows among the boulders and wild lavender scrub. It was really very lovely up there in that crisp, invigorating air, but there it ended. For of birds there was no sign whatever. Our luck seemed dead out. So, after a while, we decided to separate, he off to explore one line of ridges, I to another. And, after wandering fruitlessly along for a good half-hour or more, suddenly I heard from up above me the *chuck! chuck!* of a lone chikhori. Up the ridge I doubled as hard as I could go and, as I breasted the rise, away and down the other slope went skimming a fine covey of birds.

I chased that covey and a second one, and then finding it growing late set back for home. And presently came upon my friend straddled upon a rock, silent and exceeding glum, puffing at a cigarette. So, putting down my gun, I set to empty my bulging

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pockets, partly for his edification and partly, I fear, for my own small glorification. And, as I laid down the last and eighth, from a little patch of stones scarce three yards from where I stood, up got a fat chikhor and went squawking away down the hill-side. Snatching up my gun, I slipped the safety catch and had that fine bird too. A lucky shot all right! But poor A.! You should have seen his face. Sitting there, not having seen a bird, and that lovely fat chikhor squatting at his very feet all that time. I'm not sure but what he doesn't still think I'd pulled it out of my pocket. But I couldn't help feeling it was rather an over-vulgar way of rubbing it in, even if unintentional.

In course of time, more by luck than good guidance, I came across a wonderful valley. We stumbled upon it, this same friend and I, rather late in the season, so it was not much use to us that year. We registered a vow, however, that, God and the fates being willing, the opening of the next season's shooting should find us there.

A wonderful day, this First of September. In common with the opening day of the partridge season at home in England, so in India is it the opening day for most forms of small-game shooting. Guns spring miraculously from nowhere. Everybody with a gun is out, shooting parties encumber the land. You may have got your precious spot marked down all right, but till you're there and actually on the ground you can have no feeling of security that some wretched being will not have slipped in there in front of you.

The locals have a somewhat unpleasant manner of assuring their bag. For days in advance they will squat over the water-holes, keeping the birds away till they are well nigh tame from excessive thirst. One has to allow them this much, that for them it is the pot pure

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and simple, but I must say, driving in from Chaman one year on the last day of August, it made one feel a bit sick to see every water-hole one passed with bedding and cooking things laid out all around it. How one hoped the birds had been wise and decamped elsewhere, yet knowing all the time what little chance there was of it, for water in these regions is a mighty precarious affair. And, even if they did, what hope? Only from the frying-pan into the fire!

But up in the Hanna gorge it was still dark when our servants called us that September morn, a touch of early morning chill in the air. Dawn was just beginning to show grey and wisp-like over the mighty peaks looming dark and craggy beyond the vague outline of the little *dak bungalow* where the ladies slept. Breakfast had to be eaten at the double. No time for lingering. Already the donkeys and shikharis were assembled around the foot of the bungalow steps, and there were four good miles of stern up and down hill-climbing before ever we should reach the great ravine; and one must be among the chikhori before the sun is over the mountain-tops.

By a narrow goat-track, in and out among the bare brown hills towering away on either flank, our little cavalcade wended its way; four guns and two mem-sahibs on tiniest of tiny donkeys—but well capable of kicking you off if so minded—another and still tinier donkey bearing the lunch and drinks, and a dozen shikharis tailing off in rear, tall, sturdy fellows, bearded for the most part, in their baggy Baluchi pantaloons, coarse boots without any vestige of a lace, and a dirty pugaree of sorts twisted about their heads and throats, striding along, virile, tall, muscular, strangers to fatigue.

Here and there odd bunches of sisi scattered away

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with tiny warning shriek, rudely disturbed in their early morning dust bath as we rode by; once, with noisy whir-r-r, a covey of chikhori, skimming lightly away up and over neighbouring spur. It made one positively ache to be down and after them.

Dawn had broken in earnest, but yet the sun remained hidden behind massy mountain-top as the track swung suddenly sharply right-handed. And then in a moment, so swift as almost to take your breath away, lo and behold! stretching away silver-grey in the early morning mist, studded on either hand by dewy growth of lavender and juniper scrub, a wonderful ravine, broad and deep, softly outspread at our very feet.

But no pause yet, not even to admire the scene. On again, following by a tiny stream, crystal clear, flowing now softly in broad and shingly bed, now in tinkling torrent through narrow, rocky gorge. And here the task of remaining on donkey back was a difficult one indeed. As often as not it was touch and go, salvation only coming each time by aid of brawny shikhari's shoulder. Once I was as good as gone. But in the very act of sliding over my donkey's tail, I was seized in a pair of enormous hands and thrust incontinently back again upon my slippery and precarious perch.

We came to a halt at length where the ravine broadened out into a great valley, suddenly and violently on either hand. Guns were unslung, pockets crammed with cartridges, shikharis distributed among the guns, and the preliminary climb to get into line begun. No small feat either, against time, for it was a matter of some two hundred feet tough clamber before ever the topmost gun should reach his position in the line.

And now in the great valley, save for the twittering

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of tiny birds among the wild lavender stems, silence reigned supreme. Everything was still and very peaceful, gossamer-clad in haze of velvet grey. Nothing stirred. Nor a single chikhor might there have been in all the world. Still and peaceful it lay, not so much as breath of air to stir the mist, and the sun slowly showing, hot and red, on the other side across the way, and the sweet and sometimes almost overpowering scent of wild lavender teeming down upon one everywhere.

But now the line had gained position. A low whistle! The signal! Slowly the line began to move forward. Slowly we forged ahead, breath beginning to come short, puffing, panting, tiny streams of sweat oozing beneath topee rim, up and down, all the time, terrific climbing, picking precarious way over sharp and often crumbling rock, through tangling tufts of lavender bush and tamarisk, in and out among the stocky, stunted junipers, then suddenly—*Crack!*—a shot from away up above. The opening shot! The thrill of it! A sudden whirr and a scurry. Half a dozen tiny specks sail away over the further slope. And with the broken echoes ringing sharp from crag to crag, suddenly the great ravine is full of sound, *chuck, chuck!*—*chuck, chuck!*—*chuck, chuck!*—the alarm signal of the lordly chikhor, prince of all the partridge tribe. The whole valley seems suddenly alive with them. *Chuck, chuck!*—*chuck, chuck!*—*chuck, chuck!* . . .

From nowhere a hare springs into being, scuttling wildly into sudden somersault as gun speaks. *Crack!*—*Crack!*—*Crack!* Barrels are getting warm. The bag is mounting up. The outer guns have paused. The jungle of undergrowth is getting denser and denser. It is hard to keep a line. From somewhere in between the two middle guns are firing continuously. Word

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spreads. Seven birds are down together. A hot corner indeed! You come across it like that, a covey of birds gone to ground. All along, as you go, your shikharis are sending showers of rocks and stones into any likely hiding-place. Terribly tight the beggars sit, particularly after the sun is well up. A well-placed stone will flush a bird, and then another, and another—you never know how many. Out they come, at all angles, and it's splendid shooting.

But the respite is short. Your Baluchi shikhari has the eyes of a hawk. They'll follow up a runner, or retrieve a wounded bird far faster in those hills than any dog. Few dogs, for that matter, could last in this sort of shoot, nor is there a scent worth speaking about in the dry, sun-parched rock and scanty soil.

So on again. Crack!—Crack!—Crack! Half a dozen more birds, another hare. The bag is slowly growing. A halt is called. It is nearing ten, and we've been going since seven, and the early September sun has lost little of its midsummer power. The shikharis collect together, squatting on haunches, puffing luxuriously at Gold Flakes handed out with no unlavish hand, laughing, gabbling, deep-toned and throaty, scarcely turned a hair despite the terrific three-hour up and down.

The two centre guns have ten brace of birds each on their game-sticks and half a dozen hares. The outer guns have less to show, indeed, very little indeed. But they are new to the game, and it's one which takes a bit of learning. Anyhow, what does it matter what one gets or who gets it? What can beat the marvel of it all up here, the scenery, the air, the freedom, the glowing sense of bodily fitness—for you've got to be jolly fit to do it. And so we smoke and mop peacefully awhile, and then it's pipes out and up and on again.

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Back on our tracks, but higher up the mountain ridges now. Early morning the birds come down to the stream for water, later to return to rest and shelter amongst the thicker scrub, till feeding-time arrives once more as the sun goes down. And now it's "stone" like blazes, for the birds are beginning to lie like logs. Often you can practically stand on them till a lucky shot sends them squawking from your very feet. So on and on, slowly, oftentimes halting to readjust the line, for it is terribly thick and tangled up here. Now, at last, the little forest hut looms up in the near distance, where the memsahibs are awaiting us, and beside a little crystal spring lunch laid out under the shade of a giant juniper tree; and one sinks down, dead-beat, and only gallons and gallons of liquid produce at length some small effect on a thirst well nigh unquenchable.

So, till hard on four, luxuriously stretched with a book, or handkerchief across the face in vain attempt to snatch a nap; for, no matter what you do, on point of dropping off some portion of your anatomy will get exposed, and the homely house-fly in Baluchistan swarms in his legion, and there's *no* getting away from him. A cup of tea before setting forth again; the game, which by now the shikharis have cleaned and loaded, with luncheon things, on the little donkey, despatched to the bungalow; the line reforms, every one this time, and the final beat in the direction of home begins.

Birds here are not so plentiful. Soon tired limbs begin to lag. Guns are getting terribly heavy. A couple of hours later, the sun already low on the far hills, we begin to close in on to where, in the trough of the valley below us, our donkeys are amiably browsing. Another fifteen brace added; another couple of

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hares, the total bag for the day close on a hundred head.

Almost beyond dragging one foot in front of the other we clamber wearily on to our donkeys' backs. Follows a seemingly endless period of pitching and tossing. Suddenly, away through the darkness, which has fallen upon us like a pall, there spring out the tiny twinkling lights of our now not so far distant bungalow.

Wooden-legged and wooden-kneed we tumble from our mounts. More drinks—liquid by the gallon; hot, luxurious baths; a wonderful dinner of game soup, roast chikhori, and fruit salad, eaten beneath the stars and rounded off by a glass of port, to the homely smell of simmering logs and wild lavender. And so to bed at nine, with the feeling of having spent one of the most wonderful days in all the world, and the joyous anticipation of a similar one to follow on the morrow.

CHAPTER IX

INDIA STILL

THE Khojak slopes are a fine breeding-ground for chikhor. They live there in their scores.

Lots and lots of tiny sisi also. I say breeding-ground advisedly, because it is certainly not shooting ground. Often, at first, on my frequent journeys to and from Chaman I'd hop out of the car and chase those wily birds, and have been known to get a brace or two. But after a while I grew wise and gave it up. A skimming flight of a couple of hundred yards for the bird, is a heartrending up-and-down crawl of half a mile or more for you. It really wasn't anything like worth it.

Chaman! What a fascinating and really rather remarkable little place, set out there all by itself, lone and remote on outermost fringe of uncertain neighbouring state, reliant for water supply on a seven-mile length of precarious pipe-line, equally precarious of communications, barred off from Mother India by a well nigh impenetrable wall of mountain chain.

Alight a moment from your car, just where the winding road crosses the Khojak Pass and, clambering some ten feet up or so, look down into the plain. See below you the twisting road, steadily descending, down and down, solid mountain wall on one hand, sheer *khud* on the other; a faint, almost imperceptible ribbon where it slips out and away across the brown, sandy waste, till lost in the grey mountainous haze far, far

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away in the distance. Follow it along, some twelve miles or so. See that patch of green set in an interminable sea of brown? At first it will mean nothing to you, till gradually you begin to be aware of broken patches, darker greens and browns, here and there little twinkling glimmers of light. And, if you take your glasses and look, lo and behold! those little twinkling glimmers have changed to roofs, the browns and greens to wall and garden—tiny bungalows spring out, streets, hedges, trees, a railway station.

That's Chaman, gateway to India. And away a mile or so beyond, amid that arid desert waste, high perched on tiny mountain top, Spin Baldock, gateway to Afghanistan and Kandahar.

This queer little outpost of Empire always put me vaguely in mind of another lone outpost, Gibraltar. There you have Linea, the neutral zone, North Camp barrier, dust, smells, the interminable flow from Spain, workmen, artisans, cars, mules, donkeys, pouring through in ceaseless flow; here, Spin Baldock, the desert waste, the Big Fort, dust, stench, the intermittent flow from Afghanistan, merchants, tribesmen, camels, donkeys, sheep, goats, trickling through in constant and never-ending stream.

Chaman is one of the chiefest gateways for the fruit and vegetable market of India. Through it Kandahar pours her harvest—grapes, melons, peaches, apricots, pumpkins, marrows, turnips, cabbage, cauliflower, every imaginable Eastern and Western form of vegetable you could possibly desire. And the grapes! Seldom, elsewhere, will you eat such grapes, long, wine-coloured muscatels, tiny, pipless raisins in clustering bunches, sweet and succulent, almost melting away in the mouth. In they come in their hundredweights, swinging rhythmically from the backs

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of camels, high-piled on backs of tiny donkeys, neatly packed in circular, grass-woven baskets, indeed, so wonderfully that scarce tiniest blemish can be found in velvet bloom. And so into the waiting train, slowly, puffingly up the lower slopes, plunging into the Khojak Tunnel, out again, Shabagan—home of the Tunnel guard, Bostan—link with the distant chrome mines of Hindubagh; Balleli, Quetta, the fruit market. . . .

Have you a moment to spare for a peep into this fruit market? It's well worth it. Never will you see so much fruit massed together again. Up a low flight of dirty steps you pass, in through a massive metal gateway, there to find yourself at entrance to great walled-in square or quadrangle. A dirty urchin, complete with rush basket, lynches limpet-like on to you, whether you want him or not, for there is always abundance of hope in the urchin Oriental. You pass in. A heterogeneous smell greets you. It seems to be composed confusedly of all the fruit and vegetable odours known to you, and mingled indecipherably into one. It blasts in upon your senses to the accompaniment of a billowing volume of sound not unlike that of shingle and ocean roll. All the fruits and vegetables in the world seem to be conglomeration here. All the way adown and around the lofty walls trestles with low, broad, wooden benches go stepping slowly up nigh to where iron roof comes sweeping down. Everywhere is divided into stalls. In the midst of each, like a gigantic, busy spider, cross-legged, sits the owner among his goods, a pair of scales handy at his feet, pile upon pile of fruit or vegetable (one or other; they never sell both). Such seems an accepted creed), all about him, above, beside, below, serving half a dozen buyers at the same time and ogling for more.

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See those two English memsahibs who've just come in, students' wives from the Quetta Staff College both. "Memsahib! Memsahib!" The spiders are at them already. Watch the little one in front with the auburn hair and the cute little green hat, a newly-wed just out from England.

"Peach, memsahib? Fine peach—nice melon—what you buy, memsahib?" Fat fingers never still, a couple of bananas slapped into a slip of a dingy newspaper, a coin passed, next—"What you want, memsahib? *Bahut accha* melon—fine peach—four anna pound, memsahib."

"Four annas?" A diffident shake of head. "Two?"

"Nahin, nahin, memsahib—four annas pound!"

"Three, then?" very uncertain.

"Nahin—four, memsahib!" The black eyes twinkle. He's got her marked down. He knows. "Four anna market price [the liar!]. Very cheap. Four anna pound!"

"Well—Very well. I suppose I've got to—" A resigned shrug, "But I think you're a dirty old robber . . ."

And now the other. No novice this one. A stern *quaihai* from the plains, mother of a hundred sons. "*Kya hai?* [What's that?] Four annas—indeed! You . . . *badmashi-wallah!* Two!"

"Nahin, nahin, memsahib! *Bahut bahut accha* peach—three anna?"

"Two!"

"Ah, memsahib—" "

"Two!"

A whimsical shrug of fat shoulders. Out comes the dirty scrap of paper. "How many pound, memsahib—?"

Extraordinary, the amount of fruit these *mulki-log*

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(countrymen) will eat. They almost live on it. Take a look at that group of burly, bearded ruffians squatted over there around that pile of half a dozen or so of gigantic water-melons. They are about to put away a few pounds each at least. A dull, rather nauseating meal you'd have thought it, but they seem to enjoy it well enough. Watch them at it, the preliminary careful peeling of hard, green skin, the deft removal of black, beetle-like pips, the slicing into well-proportioned pieces, the careful distribution, the slow, steady munch, munch as chunk after chunk disappears like so much honest bread and cheese down those capacious throats. Remarkable how these hardy great fellows are able to thrive on so slender a diet. Nothing else till the evening meal of chapatti, eaten with some curried mush or other.

Here, as elsewhere in the East, the water supply question has its eternal complication. The locals have a method of bringing the water down from the mountain springs to the lower levels of the plains and valleys by what is known as a *karez*. This consists of an underground channel made by sinking a series of shafts or wells, and linking them at foot by a small tunnel through which the water flows down, the first shaft or two often being to a depth of some hundred feet or more. A fairly big order, when it is remembered that every bit of earth is slung to the surface in bags worked on a wooden derrick. Gradually, as the tunnel reaches the lower levels, the shafts become more and more shallow, till presently the water emerges into the light of day, flowing thence in a deep and mud-banked channel which develops after a while into a narrow, V-shaped trench, and so on to the villages and crops which it so amply supplies.

I've never been clear in my mind whether the *karez*

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is the actual water-channel, or whether it is the name given to the little shafts. We used to talk about chucking a stone down a karez, or walking down a karez line, and on a map you'd find a line of these little shafts marked in as such-and-such a karez. So there it is. I only mention it because I hope it will make my meaning clearer when I go on to tell of how we used to shoot the little blue-rock pigeons in these karezes. For these pigeons would oftentimes make their homes here. It was rare fun shooting a karez line, one gun on either side, and mighty careful to keep the towering mound of earth at mouth of shaft between the two of you. Then down you'd lob a stone, or lump of earth . . . *splosh!*—a sudden whirring sound, coming up gently nearer . . . a soft rattle of wings, and up in the air like soaring rocket, or else along the ground with swooping flash, a small blue-grey form—a *crack!*—another!—something falls . . . or doesn't—— That's the blue-rock.

Only here and there you'll find him, seldom in more than ones and twos, only very occasionally in any large numbers. Once, as night was falling, my wife and I came upon a veritable swarm. It was only the odd bird at first, we spied, sitting on the edge of a distant karez. But, presently, we noticed others circle a moment round, then disappear. Like mice we crept along and posted ourselves on either side. It was a very ancient karez, more like a cavern than a well. I plugged a stone. Immediately there came a sound rather like a heavy goods train approaching. In a moment the air was full of wings, not one bird, nor a dozen, but scores. We shot till the light was gone and not a cartridge left between us. Unfortunately we'd got only what we happened to have in our pockets, which was far from sufficient, but we managed to get a

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couple of dozen birds between us. It was a great shoot.

But this karez shooting really does require a good deal of care, more so almost than any other form of shooting I know. What makes it so tricky is the fact that one gun has most of the time to be out of sight of the other. One couldn't be too careful. From the point of view of the pot it was as well to have two guns; so one day, my wife being otherwise engaged, I took with me a friend who'd often wanted to come. But I regretted it almost before the shooting had started. He startled me right away by his nonchalant manner of handling his fully-loaded gun. He had all manner of ways of holding it. Sometimes it was at the trail, sometimes butt uppermost across his shoulder, as often as not slung unceremoniously in crook of elbow-joints behind the back. It was really rather unnerving. Once, after peering down his barrels for about the twentieth time, I simply couldn't help protesting; which had no effect at all, and obviously amused him intensely. But when, shortly afterwards, during a moment of temporary respite, I found him leaning placidly at ease on his gun, the fully-loaded barrels pointing directly into the very pit of his stomach, I shoved this hardy sportsman half a dozen karezes ahead of me and saw to it that he jolly well kept there.

But that was not even yet the worst. The limit was reached when we were preparing to board the car again to get off to another karez line. For, being unconvinced in my mind that his gun, which he had just shoved into the back of the car, was unloaded; and, being by now suspicious of anything connected with my friend, having picked it up and broken the barrels on pretext of examining the beauties of the weapon; and having found, as I expected, two live cartridges

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still in it, I was completely defeated by his cheerful reply to my expostulation, that here in India it was always done; indeed, that shooting never really ended till reaching one's bungalow door. And that was that! Needless to remark, it was the last time we ever went out shooting together again. After all, one's skin *is* one's skin, and . . . ! All the same, it is remarkable the number of men one meets who are almost equally careless in handling a gun; totally unmindful, apparently, that if improperly handled, or the ordinary laws of shooting disregarded, the shot-gun can be the most dangerous weapon in the world.

In this part of India the best shooting is to be had down in Sind. Here, during the cold weather months, is the home of every variety of wild fowl imaginable. Indeed, if you can but find the right place, the number of cartridges you'll be able to let off will be limited only by the number you can afford to expend. But here again you are faced with exactly the same problem as you were with the chikhori—unless, that's to say, you happen to be one of the local gods, the Political, the Departments, the man on the spot. If you're only a soldier, and a soldier in India's a very little pot—except, of course, when it comes to dangerous affairs like rioting and the such like, very disturbing to the Political or Civil—then, as I say, if you're only a soldier, your chances are pretty poor. But if you're only a very little pot, then God help you! for you'll have to scrounge like blazes if you're going to get even the tip of your finger into the pie.

I was only a very little pot, but I must have been lucky. Three times I ventured into Sind, and three times I had the shoot of a lifetime. A queer place, this Sind. Greater in area than the whole of England, a good half of it is just waterless desert, populated

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solely by the insect and lizard tribe, creatures which seem to find a queer enjoyment in basking on a red-hot stone or patch of sand and which are capable, apparently, of existing indefinitely without water in any shape or form. But the other half is a very different matter. It is a wonderland in all its glory, where the dazzle of the desert is forgotten, where the sheen of water is rippled by passing storm, where green trees, cultivated fields, and clustering villages gladden the eye of man. A wonderful, fertile valley is this through which the Indus flows, a deep and placid river in ponderous flow between muddy banks and forest curtain, where at a distance you may glimpse the sail of some great river craft slipping slowly and peacefully down the sluggish stream.

In the days of our pioneer forebears the wild-fowl hunter must have been restricted mainly to the banks of this great stream, and the odd jheel here and there occasioned by it. Perhaps, too, a certain amount of sport at rather greater ranges; for an irrigation system, centuries old, did definitely exist. Its ancient waterways are still to be found, indeed, are often incorporated in the present-day ones.

But things nowadays are very different. Now you'll find vast tracts of land reclaimed from the sandy waste. For miles in depth mighty canals split the aforetime desert into glowing belts of cultivated land. A wondrous network of waterways, emanating from the never-failing flow of the mighty Indus, bring without fail, beneath the careful eye of the Irrigation Department, the water so necessary to the irrigation of the corn and maize, home of the grey and black partridge, and the jolly little quail; the replenishment of muddy jheel, resort of the homely water-buffalo—better still, the winter residence of the duck tribe

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and the teal, and their mutual little relative, the snipe.

The first occasion my wife and I paid a visit to Sind was under the kindly auspices of one of the Irrigation Department. It landed us, at the end of forty-eight hours by train, and twenty-four miles by camel, on the fringe of Nowhere. There was a small and comfortable rest-house, or inspection bungalow, as I believe it is more properly called. It was adequately furnished; indeed, marvellously so, for everything else was primitive to a degree.

Game swarmed there; partridge and quail to a degree I've never met elsewhere. One favourite shoot I remember in particular. There was a large belt of tamarisk jungle which ran for about a mile alongside a patch of cultivated land. It must have been alive with partridges, both black and grey, for in the early morning, or towards sundown, the fields, anywhere up to a hundred yards or so from the scrub, were positively thick with them. We'd form a line and beat along the edge of the jungle, and as we went birds would rise from the stubble in their legion. The difficulty was the lack of cover, the stubble being mainly the bits of ends where the maize had been cut; so that most of the birds got up well out of range. But the crossing shots one got were fine, and a bit too difficult for me, the main trouble being that, not having a dog, one had to stop them dead, or any bird falling into that impenetrable jungle of closely-twining scrub was as good as lost at the very outset.

There was only one jheel near us, but there again I've never found a better. It was very overgrown with scrub and reed, but it was just chock-a-block with mallard. There was a five-mile camel ride to it. That was the only transport available. And sitting up there

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in close and over-intimate companionship with a bunch of violets, as represented by the unwashed aborigine who straddled the foremost part of the camel in front of you and drove it, and against whose unsavoury back your nose had to be more or less permanently glued, your chances of falling off asphyxiated before reaching your destination were sufficiently great.

The watermen there were a jolly lot of fellows, but of all the villainous natives I've ever run across out shooting, never have I met a finer set of pilfering rascals than these. We were all of us sufficiently raw to the country and fair prey to these gentle watermen. It was not long before they had taught us a couple of useful lessons. The first, never lend a waterman a knife. He'll ask for one, sure as fate. Don't you give it him! It'll reduce your bag by a quarter at least. He's a Mussulman, and a Mussulman may eat no flesh that has not been *halalied*, a pleasant little process of cutting the creature's throat and letting it bleed to death to the accompaniment of some incantation of sorts. So, if he can manage to *halal* a wounded duck, he's going to. And if he does he's going to eat it, and not you, and he likes a duck as well as anything else on earth. So look out!

The second lesson was: (a) never to hand him over a bag of loose cartridges, (b) to keep them in their cardboard boxes and never to refill till you could do so with a box full, and (c) to keep jolly good count of every box or loose cartridge there. They're quite capable of getting away with a full box or more if you don't watch them like a cat.

But, except for these and other minor failings, we had little to grumble about, for our watermen gave us rattling good sport. They used to take complete charge of us. Indeed, there was not much else for it

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as we only knew a few words of Hindustani between us. We'd set forth in boats, and then they'd dump us in varying degrees of mud, then off and do a *chukka* round and beat the birds over us; and a remarkably good show, too, they made of it. Three of these beats would see us out of cartridges—allowing, of course, for what they had relieved us of. The jheel was simply full of mallard, fine, fat birds, and when you hit one you'd see him sort of crumple up and come down with a fine walloping splash.

The last time we went we decided we'd have a regular *battue*, and took double the number of cartridges. What was our disgust, therefore, on arrival to find the jheel stone dry. Those villainous rogues made a show of putting up a beat, but it was all too obvious a fraud. One duck certainly did get up, the only one. It was coming straight at us. Suddenly out of the blue shot a hawk, swooped upon it like a streak of lightning, and bore it away in triumph right from under our very noses. We were angry! As well for him he'd been just out of range, or I believe one of us would have let him have a couple of barrels for his cheek.

However, we made up with snipe—so far as snipe can make up for duck. The place was alive with them. I'd only got fives, but even so I managed to get some twenty couple to my own gun. Never before or since have I seen so many of them all together and in so small a compass. Oft-times whisps of fifty or more would go swooping by. Once or twice I tried to brown them, but they were always just out of range. I'd have liked to see how many I could have got.

The really rather extraordinary thing about these little jheels, which, from about the end of January till when the rains begin again in June, are quite dry, is

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the fish one gets in them. The last occasion on which we shot for duck the fishermen were still bringing fish in from anywhere up to four or five pounds' weight. The day we shot for snipe and the jheel as dry as a bone, not the slightest trace was there of fish or fin, either dead or alive. And yet, we were assured that did one but go back again the following year and the jheel was full again, we'd find the locals fishing away just as merrily and getting bags every bit as heavy. It sounds a fairy story, but it's not. Anybody who knows these parts will tell you the same. The fish apparently just disappear into the mud and live there till the water comes again. It really is quite true, but you needn't believe it if you don't want to.

That time we were down I hadn't got a dog. Consequently the number of wounded birds which got away was pretty terrific. Anybody hates leaving a wounded bird on the ground, but without a good gun-dog one's hopes of avoiding it are poor in the extreme. I was a student at the Staff College on that occasion, but, when I returned to Quetta as a B.M., I was determined that if I was going to shoot at all I was going to have a dog. But that was all very well. The question of where that dog was coming from was a bit more than a puzzler. Already-trained dogs were an over-expensive luxury. Then somebody, one day, got telling me how easy it really was to train a gun-dog; it only needed, so he said, a bit of patience, and a book of reference to tell you how to do it. He very kindly mentioned the name of one.

So I bought this book and read it up. And, really, it did sound pretty average simple. Thus inspired, I beat round and after a while ran to ground a Sergeant of Ordnance who'd got a litter of spaniel pups, highly bred, according to him. They were four

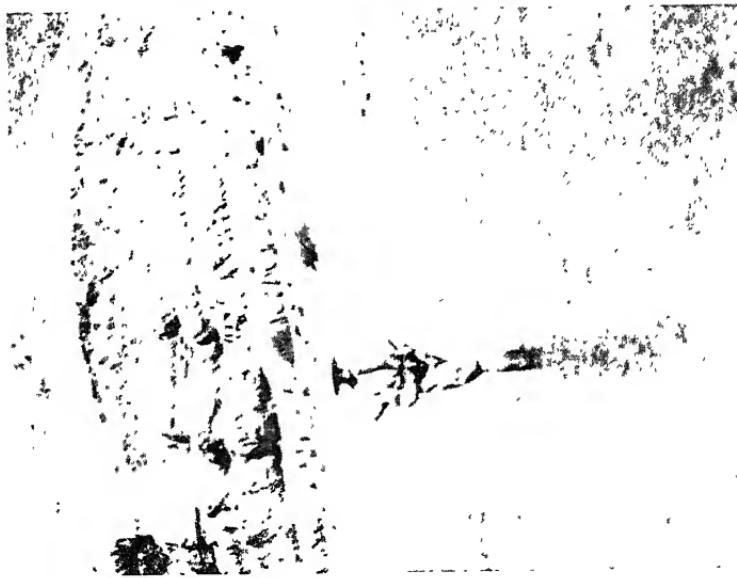
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months old, and my book said: "Begin to train your pup when he's six weeks old." But they were jolly little fellows and there didn't seem anything else for it; and so I bought one and set out forthwith, as soon as it had got more or less to know me, to put it through its paces.

Now, I didn't have much luck with that pup, not the book's way of doing it, that's to say. Maybe I'd never make much of a hand at that sort of game; or maybe I'd made an initial mistake and bought the wrong book—one intended only for dogs of pedigree. For there was no doubt, as he grew up, that Bill was no pedigree pup at all. He'd got the blend all right of a very fair assortment of sporting dogs, but definitely no pedigree. He couldn't, in spite of what my friend, the Sergeant of Ordnance, had promised, have been frightfully well bred at all. But despite that, he developed into a grand dog, strong as an ox, and with the heart of a lion, and I wouldn't have had another for anything else in the world.

My very first attempt to carry out the instructions of the book ended in complete fiasco. In fact, seldom have I been nearer the point of losing my temper entirely and completely; which would have been breaking for certain *the* most fundamental law in training any animal. There was a good deal of reference in my book to "stuff." By that I found it to mean game—rabbits, partridges, hares and the such-like. It bade you take your pup out among plenty of "stuff," to get him used to it, to train him not to run in, and so on and so on. That threw me straight away into a proper dilemma for, beyond innumerable pi-dogs and any quantity of cats, there was no other kind of "stuff" around us that I could think of whatsoever.

"Action"



The river at Kinta--near Sibi

"Interlude"



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So I turned over a few pages and got on to what happened next. Here it said: "Give your puppy some little thing, and then get him to give it back to you." Well, that sounded easy enough. It went on to say: "Go on increasing the distance till he has to bring it to you," and that didn't sound too difficult either. It added that a dummy bird with a few sharp things stuck in it, to keep the puppy from biting and inducing a softer mouth, was highly to be advocated. There were no dummy birds to be bought in the bazaar, so with the aid of a couple of chicken wings, a strip of velvet my wife very kindly let me have off an old frock of hers, which I thought was rather a suitable colour, and some cotton and a needle, I set to make the nearest approach to it that I could think of; and, further to comply with my instructions, filled it with half a pound of the sharpest nails procurable.

Then I took Bill out on to the lawn, and after various sounds intended to indicate friendliness and goodwill (getting his confidence, the book called it), gave him the bird and bade him give it back. Instead of which, on that occasion and on every subsequent one, he quickly retired behind a chest in the hall, and there did his best to devour it, nails and all. The bare idea of getting him to bring it back to me from a distance was a scream. It was impossible to get him to give it back at all. In the end I got so furious with him that I rushed off and ordered the syce to saddle a horse and went for a good long ride instead. Thus ended my attempts at lessons. Somehow, by dint of all manner of minor subterfuge, I did at length, to a certain extent, succeed, though I fear neither he nor I together were very popular in a line. I still picture him bringing in the bird, quite dead always, and his brown mouth full of feathers. I used to get dreadfully angry

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with him at first, but gradually got sort of used to it when I found he limited it to killing a bird and never trying to eat it. He was a grand dog and a wonderful companion, and it nearly broke my heart when, three years later, on leaving India, I had to say good-bye to him.

A four-week trip into Sind is really rather a terrific undertaking when you start getting down to it. Little at first does one realise the hundred and one items which have to be thought of and catered for; the host of minor details to be considered before ever you'd dare venture into a zone where the only thing with which you may be able to supplement your store is a bit of meat, and not always that. There's the whole food supply to be thought of, the distressing business of whittling down the liquor quota, sodas by the dozen, cartridges by the thousand, camp equipment, soap, cooking things, an innumerable host of other troublesome things.

Cartridges, too, must be carefully restricted. My wife and I used to limit ourselves to three thousand between us. Then there was the question of sizes. For us the problem was easily solved, for we always used nothing but sevens. But for the other wretched people, who wanted to suit the size to the occasion, it involved a terrible calculation. Certain it was, moreover, that they'd run out of one or other size before they'd be through with it. There's nothing, to my mind, for variegated shooting, to beat a seven. It will bring down a duck or a hare as easily as it will a partridge or a snipe. I've known men who swear by, and always use, an eight: but that, it always seemed to me, was going it just one too fine.

Almost the biggest thrill of the trip, I think, is the wonderful contrast between getting into the train at

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Quetta under arctic conditions, and arriving at Sibi, half a dozen hours later, in time for dinner, and able, if so minded, to walk about with perfect comfort in nothing else than a suit of pyjamas. The second time we shot in Sind was under the ægis of a local Political, so we did the thing in style; our destination a place called Sehwan, next door to the Munsha, Sind's biggest lake and famous for its multitude of geese and duck.

We boarded the train at Quetta in a heavy snow-storm. By the time we reached Sibi it was already dark, but beautifully warm and sultry, and everything smelling of mimosa-bloom and Station. It's difficult to describe that last smell in any detail. One knows of various scents and smells—verbena, rosemary, sulphuretted hydrogen, cabbage water, pig sties, a London Tube—but there's no other smell in the world that I know of quite like that of an Indian railway station platform. It's quite beyond description.

We reached Sehwan the following morning about midday. A pleasantly disposed Indian official met and conducted us through a barging, screaming medley of hurrying passengers, local residents, sightseers, beggars, pi-dogs, and filthily dirty urchins, to where in the station yard half a dozen tongas, in the last extremity of dilapidation, awaited us.

The town itself is built round a hilly elevation rising abruptly out of the plain and, for one tenanted by a native population entirely, quite a moderate-sized one at that. It took us a good ten minutes' drive through the narrow, shop-lined, squalid streets, before we emerged at length into a sharply spiralling roadway, on up it through a high, arched gateway, and so into a roomy enclosure at the very summit of

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the hill—or Fort, rather; for its battlemented ramparts date back for their construction to the days of the Alexandrian invasion of India. At the further side of the enclosure lay the Rest House, a long, low, verandah-circuited building, fairly clean, furnished up to a point and, taken as a whole, in an excellent state of preservation.

By the time we'd had a meal and got our belongings sorted out and more or less in running order, there was time for little more than to fix up a *bandabast* for a visit to the jheel on the morrow, and a stroll round the neighbouring fields to get the lie of the land and maybe pick up a stray partridge or quail. And so back to dinner and bed, and none too sorry to be there.

Next morning a retinue of tongas in charge of the *Munshi*, our estimable friend who'd met and taken charge of us at the station, awaited us in the rising dawn. Breakfast had to be eaten by the uncertain light of a hurricane-buttie propped on top of a jam jar, and a couple of candles stuck in soda-water bottles—the bungalow lamp having flatly refused to function. It was a good three mile drive to the jheel, so that we had to be off early. We swung out of the main road almost at once and plunged into a broad, sandy and tree-lined alley-way; so heavily lined, indeed, and festooned overhead by the fine great mimosa trees on either side, as to be in a sort of wonderland of softly flickering shade and shadow.

From every field the partridges were calling. *Tita! tita! tita!* they shouted; *tita! tita!* . . . A score of grimy porkers scattered grunting away among the cactus. The air was full of twitterings, a soft, melodious cooing everywhere. Countless numbers of little blue-grey doves, busy in the vaguely misted

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sand, rose with a soft flutter of wings almost from beneath the pony's hooves; once a jolly little covey of speckly brown quail. Swarms of little green parakeets everywhere, preening themselves noisily among the branches, flashing past in screeching flight as we ambled slowly and amiably down the dusty, bumpety way.

Presently we left the broad alley-way and swung down a narrow track, inches deep in dirty, black sand, slowly becoming narrower and narrower till scarce room was left to pass. On either side stunted cactus leaves played a sort of devil's tattoo against the wheels, strands of mimosa thorn went swishing by, often missing one's face by inches. And now, on either hand, mud walls begin to appear, reed thatching, an ever-growning stench of rotting herbage and stagnant water. Then, suddenly, we are through. Suddenly, spread out there before our eyes, a wonderful vista of glinting water; and at its edge a score of boats, a group of loin-clad squatting watermen; and all around urchins and pi-dogs, awaking the echoes with their yells and barking.

In a moment we are surrounded by an excited, jabbering throng. Fortunately for us our friend, the *Munshi*, is there to take charge. Everything is quickly settled. Out come the guns, lunch, drinks, cartridges and the other paraphernalia. A fight is narrowly averted between Bill and half-a-dozen pi-dogs. We are into our respective boats. The *Munshi* gives terse orders: obviously he is a man to be obeyed. Swiftly we slide away and across the water. Long bamboo poles are exchanged for stocky, target-shaped paddles. On padded seat in back of boat we sit, my wife and I. She lights a cigarette, I my pipe, slowly, reflectively. There is no place

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at the moment for speech. It is all too wonderful, too entrancing, everything about this early morning scene, almost bewildering. . . .

This jheel is on the narrow side, narrow as jheels in Sind go. But away beyond the main sheet of water there lies a mazy network of marshy waterway, linking and inter-linking, tree-girt and rushy, pleasant feeding ground for countless swarms of duck and teal. Tall trees fringe it everywhere. All along a rising patch of ground not so far from where we embarked, in and out among the reeds, nestles the tiny fishing village. Wonderfully picturesque, now that the stench of it is left behind, its brown mud walls and reed-thatched roofs mingling gently with the background of greens and greys. Tall palm trees grow in and out, singly and in clusters. Slender reeds thrust themselves delicately above the shimmering surface, steely-grey in the early morning haze, a single fleecy cloudlet reflected palely in its mirror face. Scarce a ripple, save where a small girl, naked down to voluminous red petticoat, whacks and souses some garment upon convenient stone, sending the little eddies chasing gently after one another till gradually they, too, are eaten up in the watery space.

But attention begins to wander. Above us now flight upon flight of duck are whirring. They're all there, every sort and kind, pintail and pochard, mallard, shoveller and teal. The water, too, is thick with them. Every moment more and more rise into the air, leaving with noisy swish of foam, slowly circling for height, then suddenly sweeping away till gradually they become lost in the distance, away to the safer, deeper waters of the Munsha Lake, to its reedy creeks and interminable expanse of water. Soon we come to the parting of the ways, for now the

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guns must separate and work away to their distant beats. Adieux, a fatuous joke or two, who's to fire the first shot, and we have faded away from each other's ken.

And now we enter upon a broad and reedy channel. Paddles give way again to poles. Chatter, chatter, chatter! How these beggars jabber! Reeds are getting thicker, movement becomes slower and slower. Duck everywhere—*Quack, quack!* *Quack, quack!*—*Swi-s-s-h!*—*Swi-s-s-h!*—Away they go—up and up—away and off. It seems dreadful to let them go without a shot. But it's no good yet, not till we are all securely in our places, brushwood *machans* erected, cartridges laid out ready to hand, the shikharis and boats gone to ground.

And now, at last, we are ready. Awhile we pause and wait, listening with impatient ears as flight after flight keeps sweeping past. Then suddenly we hear it—*Bang!* away in the distance; and again *bang! bang!*—and then we're hard at it too. For just about twenty minutes and then the birds are gone. Indeed, there mightn't be a duck in the whole world. And one lodges gun against a convenient tree stump, or wades around for the off chance of lonely duck, and presently eat our lunch and sit about and wait till three o'clock comes round. For at that hour the flighting will begin, and you may be certain that, as sure as eggs is eggs, from that moment on till it's too late to see, the only thing that'll stop you shooting will be your gun's too hot, or you're too dazed, or else your last cartridge is gone.

It was at the junction of two of these canals that my wife with her little twenty-bore, and I with my larger twelve, would build our *machans*. It was a wonderful show, for the birds flighting in, and always

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following these waterways, cut out any need for beating. Watching through the branches and noting in the distance a wedge of little black dots coming our way, one could put one's bottom dollar on it they'd pass over one of us. A perfect stream of birds kept coming along. I've never met anything quite like it before. A natural and most perfect drive. It all seems incredible and remote to-day. The combined bag for the four of us came that day to just over two hundred head, all duck and teal. And what a thirst one had at the end of it. Almost as bad as one got chasing chikhor among the foothills of Quetta.

This water question is one of the worst problems down in these parts. Soda-water is the main stand-by. But that, naturally, has its limits. I remember my wife's puzzled brows as we sat in conclave in our sitting-room, sucking her pencil and turning down our suggestions one after the other. "Don't worry about sodas for me!" manfully from one. "Long as the water's boiled any old stuff will do for me—as long as there's a drop of whisky, of course." Facetious remarks from the rest of us. More suggestions. More witticisms. I forget how many we actually took in the end; I only remember wondering at the time whether the Guard would let them all on the train or not.

Sehwan, we found on arrival, depended for its water supply on the local canal. That I rather surmised on noting a dead minnow floating in the basin of water my bearer had laid out for me. But what mattered a little thing like that? One was no longer in Quetta; besides, if the water were boiled, and, anyway, one could drop the *bhestie* a hint for more care in future. A *bhestie* is the gentleman who gets

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the water for you and keeps you supplied. This particular one used a couple of skins hung over either side of a fat bullock. He was a decrepit and apparently very elderly gentleman, and he looked always rather dirty. However, he seemed to keep us supplied all right, and when he came along we'd look the other way and talk about the shooting or the scenery. And as for the water, so long as one drank the muddy-looking liquid in tea or coffee, or diluted it with a goodly quantity of lime-juice or whisky and tried not to think too much about it, one got along with it very fairly well. Until——!

We were shooting on the other side of the canal that day. A smelly and rather dilapidated ferry boat took us across. As far as one could gather, the greater part of the populace were down there doing their ablutions. Dhobies too, beating out a soapy variety of dirty garments on smooth, flat stones a hundred yards up-stream along the water edge. Nearer to us half a dozen ancient, grey-haired matrons washed their scanty locks, also at the water edge. Just below again a sleepy bullock, knee deep in the stream. There were water-skins on its back. An ancient person beside it was busy in process of filling one. You could almost picture the rich soap-suds flowing smoothly down the open mouth. . . .

A voice spoke forcibly behind me. "I say!—That's *our bhestie!* What the . . . !" Guy, in the sharp end, looked back over his shoulder. "Good God!" he said. "It *can't be!*" and turned his head with an ill-suppressed shudder, knowing full well that it not only could be, but very definitely was. Douglas, from the stern, murmured something pretty forcible about sacking the blighter, and hoping there were plenty of sodas. Myself I had an un-

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pleasant sensation in the pit of the stomach. I couldn't have told you at that moment whether I was going to be sick or not. . . .

There was an unprecedented run on the soda-water that day. . . .

CHAPTER X

NOWHERE IN PARTICULAR

ONE of my greatest friends at my old home was a certain Tom Lugg. I associate him mainly with two things—a marvellous evening's fishing and the slaughter-house. Maybe the greater association of the two is the slaughter-house, for Tom was butcher's assistant, and a remarkably good one, too, I should imagine; for, as far as one could judge, he lived always in the slaughter-house or its immediate vicinity.

The memory of him goes back to my very youthful days. At the very bottom of the Vicarage garden lay a little orchard, part apple tree and part nut. I remember that orchard especially well for four reasons—first, the apples which were always big and juicy and very succulent; then the nuts, lovely great filberts which we used to dig out of the leafy loam and prise open with pocket-knife, and most remarkably sweet and good they were; then the number of sparrows and starlings and a host of other small birds which were always about for the shooting; and finally the awful smell which always lingered there.

For on the other side of the hedge was a pigsty—a good number of sties, in fact, and they always seemed, from the sound and smell, to be teeming over with pigs. Further along this hedge, where

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the wall joined up with it, was a little red door; and if you proceeded through that, and went on some twenty yards or so towards where our back entrance joined into the main street of the village, just in the angle on your right you'd find a pair of big doors; and, if they happened to be open, you could get a glimpse of those pigsties and the red-bricked slaughterhouse just beside.

So one really couldn't very well help having that piggy smell at the bottom of the garden, and one got so used to it as really not to matter, except perhaps when it had been raining rather more than usual and the drains got a bit stopped up. And there always seemed to be a pig being killed, and it always happened at about the same time of the morning. Just about the time when that most troublesome Nanny (sometimes one used to wonder how much nicer it would be without a Nanny, and whether it couldn't possibly be done) would be saying: "Now, Master John, *will* you keep your head still! *Your ears . . . !*" which will lead you to understand that it was somewhere about eight o'clock in the morning. And listening to those plaintive and agonising squeals one would feel very sorry for those poor pigs, and wish it hadn't to be. It seemed so early an hour and such a trying sort of death, having your throat slit like that, with a great steel knife "from ear to ear," as Tom put it in a husky and gruesome voice, in process of demonstrating to me one day, rather over-graphically I couldn't help feeling at the time, how it was done. But the smell of sizzling bacon would come nosing up the stairs and along the corridor, and—well, one felt that one couldn't have bacon without that squealing sound, and so there—well—!

I don't know how many years Tom Lugg presided

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there. It must have been a great many. Whenever one went down the village and passed those double doors and they happened to be open, sure enough there he'd be, either pulling pigs out of carts by their little pink and black tails, or busily engaged upon the inside of a very pale pink porker depended from a hook in the beam of the slaughter-house ceiling.

For many a day it caused me much speculation how it came to be that the pigs one saw swinging there, or hanging up in the butcher's shop just over the way, were always so pink and sleek when they were so black and bristly at any other time. For I'd often scratch the back of one of those feeding in our sty and not so likely to bite at that time. I once put the matter to George Skeuse, but he was no help. "Never 'e mind, Master John," he said, one eye tucked down. "Least said sooner mended. Bacon's good eating and mark out!"—which astute metaphors, though making great impression upon my childish perception, brought no enlightenment whatsoever.

But Tom with his ugly, red, three-cornered, jolly old face, and its permanent and crooked smile, was all part and parcel of that none too salubrious yard. Always there. Back from preparatory school and public school for the holidays, home on leave from one's Regiment, a couple of months, a couple of days, year after year, there he'd be, delving away for dear life in the innermost portions of a fat and swinging pink porker.

And then he'd catch a sight of me and out he'd come with his jolly: "Wull, wull, Master John! And who'd a' thought it!" (It was always *Master* John, even when I'd reached the eminence of a

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major's crown, and aught else would have been too dreadful to the hearing.) "Wull, *wull!* Back again? And main glad I be to see 'e, too," vigorously wiping his hands all this time upon a blue and blood-smeared apron; and it was only the extreme recognition of our long-standing and great friendship which enabled me to grasp that horny hand, but a moment before delving in the bowels of the pink porker, without a shudder.

On one of these occasions I'd managed to snatch a couple of nights' leave, and seeing that the mayfly was on, would gladly have had it longer. But in those days it meant leave out of season, and leave out of season in the big military stations was not regarded with a friendly eye. The correct season for leave was in the winter months and a very odd week-end or two outside, so that being then at Aldershot, I felt that with my two nights I'd not done so badly.

My father, for reasons of health, as far as I remember, was unfortunately away. Indeed unfortunate, for there was a finer head of fish that year than ever since; the river was just right, not too high and not too low; the wind for once in a way was in the proper quarter; and, in its soft, balmy calm, the weather was just about as perfect as you could very well imagine.

By the time I got on the water I don't think the fly could have been up very long, and every fish was out and ready and willing to have a look at what one had to offer. I say "look at" and not "take," because that would not have been truly so. Never have I known fish come shorter, so much so that after a while I gave up the mayfly entirely and took

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to the alder. Actually I have frequently noticed this failure on the part of the fish at the beginning of the mayfly season, and until they begin properly to recognise the fly the alder's an excellent substitute and not so much smaller either, whilst his purchasing power is every bit as good if you're lucky enough to get into a big 'un.

Of course, it may have been that it was the first time I'd thrown a fly that year, or it may have been that the fish were coming excessively short, but whatever it was it astounded me the number of fish I kept on missing. A dozen at least must have been well in the area of four to five pounds, and at times it was really most infuriating. Still, by the time I got back to an early supper on the last evening I'd not done too badly. Indeed, I'd got a good round dozen of excellent fish, all averaging between one and a couple of pounds.

It was to be an early supper, because I was determined to make the most of that marvellous day and fish it out to the glorious end. And as I sat upon a cosy seat in the evening sun waiting till it should be ready, I lit a pipe and pondered drowsily there, watching half-conscious a score of dainty mayflies in merry dance above verdant green of newly-mown lawn; listening to the song of a noble thrush on the monkey-puzzler across the way, beating against the answering call of a plump blackbird perched high up on a lofty elm, and the strong, sweet scent of lilac and laburnum everywhere. Indeed, it was really all too good almost to be true. . . .

So presently I set forth for Sou'moor, and whom on my way should I chance upon but my old friend Tom, leaning shirt-sleeved and at ease, upon the crumbling coping of his ancient cottage wall. He gave me a

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grinning welcome, one finger to brim of ancient felt creation that one day might have been a hat. "Evening, Master John! Wull, *wull!* Back again? Been having any luck?" I gave him a brief recital, at which he grinned anew. "A-h! A'd bin hearing there'd be a main few about—not that I'd bin seeing none meself. Bain't got the time vor 'un'; and he gave me a squint, and got that cracker off his chest as innocent as if he'd hardly be knowing the fin of a trout from his tail. "An' wur be off to now, sir?"

I told him and he nodded approval. "Why not come and lend a hand?" said I, little thinking I'd ever get him to unhitch himself from the angle of that comfortable wall. "A great thing to have someone to carry the net," I added hopefully. A huge grin spread across his whole face. He was over that wall like a shot, shirt-sleeves and all. Away we went.

The sun was almost gone before we reached the river, dipping low behind the tall elms, for "summer time" had not yet come to England. Tom had already got possession of the bag and net. I gave him a general idea of how to handle the latter and where to stand. Honestly, I don't believe he'd ever seen it done with a fly before or handled a landing net. I reckon Tom's main idea of fishing was a stout pole and a good wire gimp at the end of it.

The first fish I got was a little one. I unleashed Tom, rather like a setter at point, and he had that fish into the net and out and on to the bank as neat as anything. And all he could do as I knelt and extracted the hook and duly returned the little fellow to his native element, was to scratch his head and murmur a sort of running commentary of: "Wull, *wull!*—Lor' love a duck, Master John! Who'd 'a thought it?—

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and on a bit of a line like that! Wull, *wull!* Minds me o' nothing *I've* ever seen. . . . Look up, sir! There be a good 'un!"

And so it was, and bet Tom to know it, and in a minute I was into him. He'd risen under a nasty bramble at the very head of the first pool. The reel screeched. Into the air he went—*splash!*—*splash!*—half a dozen times, and Tom roared his encouragements from behind. It was all I could do, by means of the most unheard-of oaths, to prevent him from rushing bodily in and laying about him with the landing net. In the end I got that fine fish beat and Tom, down on his knees on the gravel and eyes like a ferret's, had him into the net and out on the bank as if he'd been born and bred to it; and in that fast-fading light it was no mean thing. I handed him my pocket scale. He thought that fine. I think it must have put him in mind of the fearsome big black one with which he scored the weight of his fat pink porkers. It went to exactly the two and a half pounds, a beautiful yellow fish in most perfect condition.

It was getting darker and darker every minute now. Fortunately there was a moon, but even then, in that kind of semi-twilight, casting a fly upon that heavily-foliaged stream was no mean thing; and by the time we reached the top of the field, where the river ran down through a tiny copse or spinney, I was on point of giving in. But at that very moment from among the glinting shadows there came the sound of a resounding splash, and then another, and yet another. Well, that would never do. "Ave a try at 'un," prompted Tom. "Be a fine girt big 'un by the sound on 'un!" I peered into the shadows. Among the moonlit ripples made by that rising fish I could just make out where he was feeding. It was an almost

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impossible cast in that light, but egged on by the enthusiastic Tom, who by this time appeared determined I was capable of anything, I made a furtive shot at it.

Where exactly my line went, or where the fly fell, I had not the vestige of an idea, but seeing what I thought a movement under the far bank where he'd been rising, struck, and again in a moment out went my line with a screech. How I played that fish or why, or how I ever kept clear of the weeds and rushes everywhere I simply cannot think. All I know is that, after five minutes of the wildest confusion, I suddenly saw Tom rise from the rushes, the landing net do a remarkable sweep through the air, a glint of silver in the moonlight, and fish and net came to roost high up in the top of a blackthorn hedge just behind us. . . .

Two and a half pounds again that fish scaled and I don't know who was the more delighted, Tom or I. But, when later I came to give my father a glowing account of our adventure and of Tom's remarkable prowess with the net, all he'd got to say, with somewhat of a twinkle, and knowing, no doubt, that worthy a good deal better than I, was: "Well, at least you gave him a good gratuitous look round!"

But gratuitous or not, again I shouldn't like to say which of us two enjoyed that evening most. Never did I meet old Tom afterwards that he didn't remind me of it. "You mind that day, Master John, when you and me went fishing? Gor' lummy, that wur a day!" And he'd rub his hands, and his jolly old weather-beaten face would screw itself up into a hundred knots, and his cackling laughter would go ringing round the village square, with its public-house at one corner and its saddler's shop at the other, and the ancient weather-worn cross in the middle.

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A fine old cross, indeed, and to-day its ancient steps are well nigh worn away by the countless rustic seats which have sat upon it from time immemorial, and still do. Incredible it would seem that a trouser-seat should make so great an impression upon anything so hard and solid, but I promise you it's true, and if you don't believe me, well, go and look at them sitting on it any day of the week, and see for yourself.

There are four such crosses in the Village. But only one has more than steps and socket and shaft to show for itself. At the distant end of a long avenue of magnificent elms stands the old Norman church, with its fine square tower and its pleasant peal of bells. It is named: "The Church of the Holy Cross," and here in its quiet and peaceful little churchyard you will come upon as beautiful an old cross as you will find anywhere.

When my father first came as Vicar to Ashton Keynes in 1884, there was only the grey lichenized base or first step, and the pedestal or socket. It is a story of no little romance how, over a period of thirty years, he came upon and gradually collected the missing parts. First the large stones which formed the second step, in broken pieces close to the old Tithe Barn belonging in days gone by to a monastery—or nunnery, as some say—scarce a stone's throw from the south side of the church and surrounded by a fine deep moat. These were kindly given by Mr. A. W. Bowley to assist in the restoration of the churchyard.

Then, in course of his daily visitations, he came to recognise, built into the wall of the old School House, two stones, one obviously the head of a cross (authenticated later by an architect), the other what might very well be also part of a cross, and which eventually turned out to be another fine cross-head. For many

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years he sought permission to extricate them, but the then owner being only willing to consent if the whole side of the house were taken down and renewed, he was fain to let the matter drop for the time being.

Next he came upon, in the yard of the White Horse Inn, and succeeded in getting possession of, two pieces of the shaft of a cross, then in use as the upper and lower steps of a mounting stone. At a still later date he located and obtained yet another piece of the shaft of a cross, being then in use in a cottage garden as a flowerpot stand.

Finally, at the end of the Great War, and on his suggestion, it was mooted that the churchyard cross should be restored, and dedicated as the proposed War Memorial. The new owner of the old School House, a Mrs. Cove, at once offered to present the cross-head from her wall; which she duly very kindly did. The various pieces were assembled, and then it was found that not only did they actually fit each other, but that save for one small piece about three feet in length missing just above the socket, the cross was intact and in the original.

Eventually the missing part was replaced from a broken piece, obviously the bit of an old cross, and now the ancient cross stands there, calm and dignified and secure, in the same place where, till predatory and sacrilegious hands were laid upon it, it had stood and reigned for centuries before.

And dear old Tom's up there now, and the slaughterhouse yard at the other side of the garden gate has lost its charm. It was a terribly harrowing affair, an altercation with a cart-wheel, and poor Tom got the worst of it. Mayflies may come and mayflies may go, but it'll never be quite the same for me now that my old friend Tom is no longer there.

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One mayfly season caught me in Switzerland. I was at Geneva at the time, staying in a French family trying to learn the lingo. I'd not been there very long before I became acquainted with a Swiss gentleman who appeared to spend most of his days fishing the Rhone; and I must say, some of the yarns he spun to me, together with photos of trout he'd caught in it, made my poor mouth water. But I was particularly penniless at the moment and so quite unable to do anything about it. There were also mighty trout in the Lake of Geneva. I remember if you happened to sup in one of the attractive little lakeside restaurants and thought of trout, it was not a trout you ordered, but trout by the pound, just as if it were cod or salmon.

We were a queer assortment in our picturesque little flat away up at the end of the Rue-Something-or-other. My host and hostess were French, and there were two daughters. Then there was a Spaniard (who, I understood, was not particularly wanted in Spain because he was a bit of an insurrectionist, and who may be now rather a big-wig), and a Rumanian, and a German youth of about seventeen, and another Englishman who was working to be a professor, and never a word of anything but French permitted between us.

One saw very little of them except at meals, and I always regarded Pa as a particularly good sportsman the way he would work to keep a general conversation going; and at times, coming back tired from his work, I should think he must have felt far more like crucifying the lot of us. For one meal I sat next the German boy, and at the end was feeling very bad about the stomach, for he suffered terribly from his feet. I feel that Madame must have noted my tribu-

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lation, for next time I found he'd been changed to sit between herself and her younger daughter. I've often thought they're wonderfully Spartan-women.

He was really rather a remarkable boy. He talked French fluently, and he'd just won a gold medal for the pianoforte; but, when he knocked at my room one day and in the very best English offered to take me on at French for a trifle, I must say I felt my breath taken away entirely. But we fixed it up between us and a most excellent tutor he proved to be; and by dint of keeping a pipe going full blast the whole time, and getting the window open to its fullest extent at the end of it, I managed to get along very well with his feet also.

I have an idea that it must have been he who put me wise to a little stream some ten miles outside the city and which, it appeared, could be reached by tram. And so, having my rod and a bit of tackle and a fly or two with me, I ventured forth one sunny day to see what could be done about it. And having come to where I'd been bidden to descend, found myself with three miles yet to go. A good deal more like four, I should think, but then your rustic Swiss doesn't seem so very far removed from your homely Irish spaldeen. Anyway, I was jolly footsore by the time I got home again: for, when I did find the stream, and I must have lost my way half a dozen times at least, it was already time to be making off again before I'd ever come across a bit of water where it was possible to cast a fly. It was a close and stifling day and terribly dusty, and I really have seldom been more tired.

And so it was a full month before I had the fortitude to try it again; and, when at length I came to the bit I was making for, I could have kicked myself, for lo and behold! the mayfly was hard on. I'd certainly

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not reckoned on this, and so had only a couple or so of nondescript mayflies in my boxes. One side of the stream belonged to the French and the other to the Swiss, and from the few rises I saw, I doubt which could have been the bigger poachers. There could have been but very few trout at all, a surmise endorsed by an angling parson who happened to be passing. At that moment his dark grey cap was a clustering swarm of flies, and as we talked he killed a horse-fly on his neck. There was an incredible number of giant mosquitoes, too, and as for gnats, well, one scarcely had time to notice them.

I'd been in the act of spreading out an attractive bit of lunch beside a tiny spring, and was just about to fill my cup from its merry crystal flow, when his voice broke in upon me. "I'd not drink that," he said. "Oh!" said I, half jumping out of my skin, for it was my first intimation of any other presence human: "And why not, may I ask?" Damn it all! I'd relied on this little spring to save my aching shoulders, and I was hot as hell and doubly thirsty. Of course I was going to drink it!

"Well," he said, with rather a dry chuckle. "It's not supposed to be wise. You'd find the people round here would tell you you'd be enchanted." I suppose he thought, from my face, I was surmising he was already a bit enchanted himself, for, with a smile, he added: "I think more likely it's goitre; but take it or leave it—I thought it fairer, perhaps, to warn you. Any luck?"

And in the end, of course, I did drink from that spring. After all, what else was there to do? I couldn't die of thirst. And I didn't suffer any ill effects that I know of. But I believe there is something in what the old parson said, and that there is somewhat

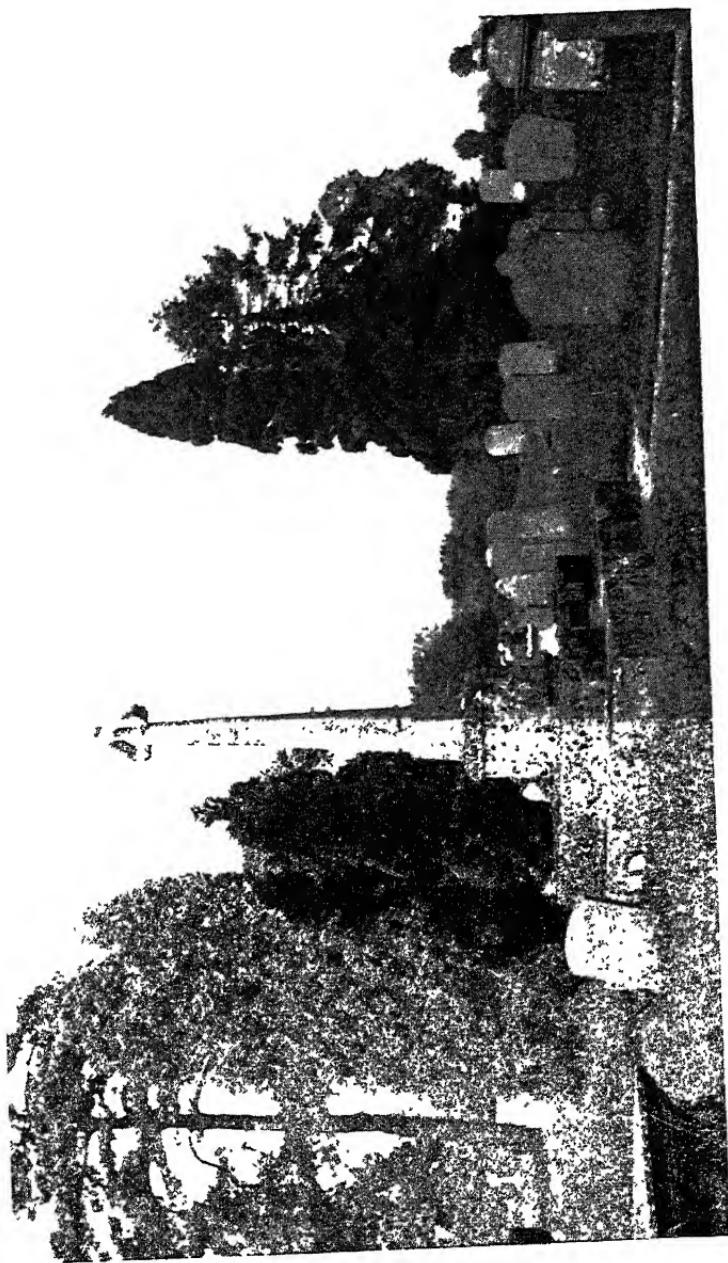
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of a risk in drinking from these icy springs when you are over-hot.

I must have gone on fishing for a couple of hours at least without the slightest sign of any fish kind enough to take even a passing sniff at my fly. The few flies I had were quite obviously not to their liking. But there happened to be in one of my fly-boxes one with a gauzy sort of wing and unlike any other artificial fly I've ever seen. Where I got it I've not the very vaguest recollection, yet to sight of mortal eye it was far nearer akin to the real thing than any of the feathery affairs which the fly-tying fraternity are apt to dish up.

There was a jolly little fish rising merrily away in a deep hole where the water ran in a bend, and who'd turned me down time after time with the greatest persistence. To him at length in sheer desperation I offered my gauzy fly and wondered what he'd make of it; and to my surprise he came at it like a tiger, and a minute or so after was out and kicking on the bank, a beautiful little pounder brown trout.

I was overjoyed. At last I'd found the fly! I began to picture a rare bit of sport yet, and a nice little bag of trout to display when I got home. But, alas! when I came to extract the hook, wedged in as tight and as firm as you could possibly want, be damned to it if those gauzy wings were now nothing but a gluey pulp. It was really *too* depressing. I tried drying them on my handkerchief, but that was no good. I found a red-hot stone and spread them out there in the sun, but that was no better: they merely seemed to get, if anything, a bit more gluey. It was all to no purpose at all. That fly was done! I gave it just one faint-hearted try and it sank like a stone. And that trout was my one and only, and I never went again.



*The Churchyard Cross—
Ashion Keynes*

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It was really too much of an undertaking; or maybe I was over-slack. So instead I'd order my pound of trout, grilled to a turn in fresh butter, and enjoy it no whit, I fear, the less for not having caught it. For, indeed, it was a luxury to sit and eat it, and after smoke a pipe, on one of those romantic little lakeside verandahs, and watch the moonlit water glinting and listen to the soft *lap, lap* of it beneath one's feet.

To the free-lance angler, the wanderer, the man who has no water of his own, no angling club to which he can belong, the business of finding a day's fishing, without going into the wilds for it, takes a bit of doing. There were, some few miles from my home, a couple of really quite good bits of hotel water. Bibury was one of them. The Swan Hotel in those days owned a very nice stretch, and many a good day have I had on its pleasant water. I speak of the past. To-day much of its old glamour is gone, for only a small portion of its one-time beat now remains, though even that is still worth a visit.

One of the greatest charms, to my mind, of fishing here is the extreme picturesqueness of the surroundings. An old-world Cotswold village, set in a world of grey stone walls and thatched roofs, the stream runs through it deep in the trough of a tree-hung, meadowed valley. The greater part of the hotel water is down here alongside the main road, but I believe just recently another bit has been acquired where you can fish in peace, and away from where the trippers crane their idiotic faces over the water just where you'd been hoping to put your fly.

I used to prefer it shortly before the mayfly came on, firstly because there were fewer brother-anglers or idiotic trippers about, secondly because the lower rate for a ticket was more in keeping with a scanty

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pocket, and thirdly because there were more fish for the getting, still hungry, and the tiny black gnat as killing a fly as you could possibly want.

One often grousing at these hotel waters and, as one sometimes feels, the insufficient attention shown to them. Yet I doubt not the life of the landlord is not all jam. There is a limit both to catch and size, but I wonder how often it is not "got away with" by the not too conscientious gentlemen, the non-resident angler whose bag it is none too easy to keep an eye on. I remember a case of this sort at Bibury, and not so many years ago, either. It was towards tea-time, and I'd done very well and got to within one of my quota, all nice fish comfortably over the pound, and was trying hard to entice one of the big ones near the bridge to complete my bag.

On the other side of the stream, the road side where you have to fish over a broad stone coping, there was another angler; and from the corner of my eye, which was all I had to spare for him, he seemed to be bringing fish out as fast as I. Little ones, which were returned as swiftly as possible, yet which in his case, and therein I took the hundred yards between us as giving deception to the eye, most certainly were not.

I was busy with a nice little trout, unfortunately just under the limit, and which, somewhat regretful now, as it was getting late, I duly returned. And glancing up, found my angler friend of the other side watching me, his rod in case, obviously homeward bound. In fact he had his foot on the step of his car as he spoke.

"Doing pretty well?" he suggested agreeably.

"Oh?" said I, somewhat shortly, being hot and tired and most horribly thirsty. "How?"

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"That's a pretty good fish you've just put back?"

"Just under the weight," said I, getting ready to cast again. "Any luck yourself?" One has to be polite.

"Got me five," he said cheerfully; and added with the semblance of a wink: "Not so good as what you've just put back there—but nice little fish for all that. You can't pay seven-and-six and go home with an empty bag!"

The other place I had in mind was Fairford. The Bull Inn is famous, and for many years most justifiably so, for its excellent stretch of water. Years ago when my father would come over for a day's fishing the ticket was half a crown. Now, in the mayfly season, it is more like five half-crowns, though this includes either lunch or tea, and a thoroughly good one, too, at that. It's a terribly big sum for a slender purse so I have seldom done more than wander down the pleasant meadow banks, and watch the rising trout and long to have a rod in my hands.

But there have been occasions. One I remember in particular and not so long ago. I was home on leave from India that year, but the floods being out and my father's water more or less unfishable, and hearing good reports of the Fairford water and the mayfly said to be showing, I bethought me to go over and see what might be doing. Which I did the following morning, and had the good fortune to strike a beautifully balmy day and the wind nicely in the right quarter. But up to comfortably after midday not the slightest sign of a mayfly. The river was alive with rising fish, none of any real size so far as I could see, but as for taking any fly I offered them, not a hope! They were busy enough with some small thing, a gnat, I suppose, or some other

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tiny fly, but I failed pretty dismally to light upon it. And so I set to and ate up my sandwiches, and then feeling somewhat drowsy what did I do but, there on the soggy bank, fall fast asleep. And waking later, behold that wretched stream fairly alive with mayfly and the fish and swallows gobbling them up everywhere.

Now, unless you know a river pretty well, there's a lot of luck if you hit upon the fish really worth the catching. And so on this occasion I flogged uncertainly along, but had the good fortune to get nothing up to weight before I came to where under the further bank stood some ancient wooden piles, once a watering place for cattle, and where in this patch of deeper water I could make out a good trout or two steadily feeding.

Unfortunately, just here the river was at its broadest, and a terribly long cast required to get anywhere near the other bank. So long, indeed, that for the life of me I could not get a fly over there at all. So at length, having on thigh boots, and though actual wading was not permitted, in I went a couple of yards or so feeling it was not too great a transgression. And at once I got into a nice trout and had him pulled across the weeds before he was properly aware of what was doing. Within an hour I'd got four fish, all between the two and two-and-a-half pounds, and a fine bit of sport they gave. There was a much larger fish roaming in and out among the piles, and I worked away for another hour, but at the end of it only succeeded in losing my fly to him. So by this time being pleasantly fatigued, for there is no harder work than throwing a long line in face of a swiftly running stream, and my eyes and back aching prodigiously, I took myself off to the hotel and a jolly good

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high-tea with a couple of nicely boiled eggs to it. And presently set forth again to try and catch the remaining fish to my quota—and, of course, failing hopelessly. Still, what did it matter? What more glorious day could one have had, beside so lovely a stream, and four fine fish into the bargain.

It must have been somewhere about this time, or maybe a few years earlier, that I took part in as queer a happening in the fishing line as so far has chanced my way. It was concerned with two trout and a pike, and it happened just where the old stone bridge, with its little white posts and ancient iron rail, spans the river away down by Withybed Corner. And Withybed Corner is next door to the Charity land, so that ought to put you more or less into the picture.

At that time, just below the bridge, the water ran very shallow near the left bank, squelchy with mud where the cattle would come down to drink at evening time. Further out in the middle was a tangling patch of weed nigh three or four yards wide, swaying and eddying in the slowly flowing current; whilst beyond again, where the bank rose high, and tree and hedge fell gently over it, the stream ran deeper, and here in shady channel was the feeding ground of a mighty trout, well known to all the village gossips and variously estimated by them at anything between four and six pounds.

But my old friend Tom knew him too, and would scratch his head and opine one better. “Bain’t seen ‘un too often like, sir. Be a bit out o’ my beat, so to speak. But I reckon ‘e be eight pound if ‘e be a score,” and he’d twist his mottled red face up at me and give me a look as artful as an old badger. “But that be only *my* opinion,” he’d add, “and—wull,

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wull, Master John, thur it be and must be getting along!" and away he'd be, off back again to where, among the shadows, the pink porker swung slowly round and round.

How to angle for this mighty fish was a difficult problem. Wading was out of the question, being somewhat dangerous in that bottomless bed of clay. There was only one other way and that was to stand in the muddy ooze on the left bank and, with treacherous hedge behind, try a cast across that maze of weed; knowing full well that, even should one get into the beggar, the chances of manœuvring him through to the other side were about as good as nil. However, every fisherman is at heart an optimist, and so was I that sultry August evening, as I crouched there, up to my knees in soft, squelchy mud, heart in mouth and awaiting the critical moment for a cast.

For I'd spotted him from the bridge, feeding lazily down the stream but slowly moving up to his old haunt beneath the bank; and his progress was easy to follow by reason of the soft sucking rises close up under the bushy, overhanging hedge. On he came—closer—and closer—and I could just make out a long, dark form slowly moving underneath an overhanging branch. The time had come. With the edge of an eye on the hedge behind, and with the greatest caution I flicked an olive dun in his direction. My luck was in! It lit lightly on the surface hardly a foot away from his great nose. There was a sudden swirl. My line went taut! Ye gods! I was into him! . . . Yet. . . . No—damn it all! What was that great wave tearing away down stream like a torpedo in full flight. . . . ?

And so it was. Another trout! Bang under his very nose that wretched little fish had whipped the

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fly away, and now behold him twice out of the water, and I half of a mind to chuck a rock at him, and rod and line and reel as well. Still, he was a brave little trout and worth the keeping and, though by now comfortably ensconced in the weed bed, I thought I'd have a try at seeing if I couldn't get him after all.

But it seemed a pretty futile chance, and it came to me then what a remarkably lucky thing it was that only a wretched little pounder was stuck away there instead of the big 'un. What earthly hope could I have ever had! So, somewhat cheered by the thought, I began to apply the strain, though wondering how long it would be before either hook or line gave way.

And then suddenly, to my profound astonishment, I realised that the apparently impossible was actually in process of happening. To the steady strain of bent rod and taut line the fish was slowly but surely coming through. In fact, it was gradually borne in upon me that, *incredibile dictu!* it was coming through of its own accord.

So, scarcely able to credit my senses, I waited, eyes glued upon the line, as steadily it drew nearer and nearer. It was as good as through when suddenly, hard on the edge of the great band of weed, there was a most prodigious splashing; suddenly a great tail lashed the water to foam. Ye gods! I must be dreaming!—The big 'un after all—yet, no—what was that? . . . Then, to my utter surprise, out into the clear water, serene and calm and too villainous-looking for words, sailed a large pike; and in his mouth, securely held at centre of body between a pair of gripping jaws, *my trout*; and in the trout's mouth, still firmly fixed, and without any shadow of doubt about it, *my fly!*

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Now, although by this time barely half a dozen paces separated us, the pike seemed to pay not the very slightest attention to me, nor even to notice the drag I began again to get on the line. I even began to wonder whether, if I played my cards correctly, I might not even yet capture not only trout, but pike as well. It was at about this point that the pike, by a fine bit of juggling—which, in the process of feeling for my net, I had the misfortune to miss—had got the trout headforemost down his throat, only half the body and tail being now visible. Which must, I think, have been the cause of his undoing.

For it must have been here that the fly, becoming detached by the extra strain, transferred itself to the narrow angle of the wicked jaws; for the next thing I was aware of was the trout wobbling rather drunkenly away and disappearing into the bed of weeds, and the pike making off with my line as fast as he could go. It was a sad moment as my fat little trout was lost to sight for good and all, more so as the pike, too, was as good as gone; for who had ever heard of a pike, with those great jaws full of sharp teeth, ever being caught on the finest of gut. Yet once more the apparently impossible occurred. The line held true; a moment the water lashed itself again to foam; then slowly and sulkily the big fish came back to me. Crouched in the mud I slid my net towards him. Slowly, without much kick in him now, across he came. Next moment I had him into it and was staggering back to the bank.

And then, when I came to look, I found that what I had conjectured had indeed happened. There was the fly hooked tight in the angle of the jaw. And thus, with a single cast of the line, I set forth to catch a six-pounder, hooked and lost a single-pounder,

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yet brought to bag a lean and out-of-conditioned jack which only managed to turn the scale at five pounds. The eternal triangle with a vengeance, yet, for once in a while, without a woman in the case!

CHAPTER XI

DOVER

EVERY place has its own associations. Some, no doubt, far more than others. Yet, for the Englishman, few places there are, I imagine, which have associations for so many of us as that ancient grey town, with its grim grey castle, sturdy sentinel above it, and its startling white cliffs staring down upon a dull grey sea, which is Dover.

How many of us, year in year out, pass through its doors, that fair gateway to Europe throughout the centuries, pass back again? Thousands—millions, . . . The War. . . . How many remember that sordid epic, all too vivid still? That eerie crossing on black mid-winter day, fraught at every moment with direst peril from submarine or drifting mine, no thought of safety till the grey wharves of Boulogne harbour rise out of the mist and spray and stretch their sheltering arms around us. Bleak, cheerless trips. Wind rain, sleet, spray. Decks a-crowd, khaki figures, life-belted, everywhere. A tearing escort, half a dozen tiny torpedo-boats, crashing through cresting wave, all around us and about; a small spray-swept bridge, a tiny navy-blue figure, megaphone to mouth, barking short, cryptic instructions to the skipper up on bridge above. So we pass out, vaguely tense, into the grey of sea and sky. . . .

Thus my own first impressions. Later again

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India—leave, homing back to the Old Country, the swift dash across France that no day shall be wasted, Calais . . . the dear old white cliffs coming nearer and nearer, the sudden quiet of the harbour . . . quayside; pandemonium, noise, din, porters, incredible bumpings; customs officials, white chalk, more porters, the Lord Warden, that suffocating and majestic hotel. And then one slides out of it all, tunnels, grey walls, squalor, smoke, grime . . . romance. . . .

Thus for memory—the fleeting hour, the passing show. Romantic? Certainly! And grim enough, for all that—in shadow. But reality—residence. . . . Incredible! Yet true. Orders to join my Regiment shortly due at Dover from the sandy wastes of Iraq. From pleasant rooms in Folkestone, that smug, immaculate coastal town, we set forth, my wife and I, to try and find a house. And, approaching Dover through a long, mean, tram-infested suburb, thinly lined on either side by red-bricked little houses and a pale fog prevalent everywhere, plunged precipitate into main and noisy thoroughfare, narrow, tram-lined, crowd-infested, and were filled with sudden gloom unutterable.

In no way relieved by what the house agent held in store for us. We were handed over to the mercies of a pimply youth, the agent's trusty representative. He climbed into the back of the car. The first house to which he took us lay in the meanest of little streets, a narrow row, little bleak grey houses flowing away, identical on either side. At the moment of arrival the landlady (though at first we took her for the char) was on her hands and knees, hard at it with a scrubbing-brush. She wore a red flannel petticoat, for it was there for all to see, stream-lining away down beyond

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an over-scanty skirt of good and honest holland. It was with no small difficulty that the pimply youth got her to desist from her labours. But when at last she did and, furthermore, had got to realise that we were prospective tenants and not the rate collectors, the look she handed out to him had just about fifty per cent essence of vitriol to it.

We seemed the spark to an over-charged mine. She fairly detonated. She was just sick to death of the whole show, the house, the place, the late occupants, the pimply youth and, though not actually saying it, but leaving it as clear as daylight to our meanest perceptions, ourselves. Was it necessary? Was it fair?—in all conscience, bringing people to look at the house at that hour of the morning? The pimply youth smiled wanly. He was obviously only too used to this sort of treatment. He cajoled discreetly, urged his case. Grudgingly she slid pail and mop to one side, and escorted us within. “As dirty a set of lodgers as ever come my way! Dirty ain’t the word for it!” She threw open a door on the left leading off the narrow, umbrella-standed corridor. “It’s not fair, I say, showing people round after what *he*’s left behind. Dirty!—an’ a Major, too . . . !” We peered in. A tiny room, terribly untidy. Horsehair sofa, horsehair chairs, tufts of horsehair protruding everywhere, muslin curtains, a fearful mantelpiece. . . . Four guineas a week. . . . We shuddered, made for the door. The army officer’s tenement . . . ! Ye gods!

The next house we were taken to was a trifle more prepossessing. A decent, broad, asphalted street, well groomed trees, a privet fence—ghastly enough, but not quite so awful. In we went. Drawing-room—dining-room—upstairs . . . a sudden horrible din—

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clank, clank, clank! it went, *clankety-clank!* Good God! —What's that? One of the snags, obviously. The answer was pat, right on the tip of his tongue: "Oh, it's only the Something-or-other Church. . . . Pardon? —Next door? Oh, yes, but it's quite—" But quite what it was, or was not, I've no idea. *Next door!* Holy smoke! We'd got a pretty good grip of it in our own minds and were out again and back in the car and waiting.

I must say one can't help pitying these wretched beings—though maybe, not having made actual inquiry, it's only pity wasted—for it would seem they must have a pretty grisly time one way and another. I even had a bit to spare for our pimply friend by the time we'd finished with him, though I could have doomed him to death quite easily. It must have been sheer desperation, the last house he took us to. It stood in an imposing crescent. It had an enormous kitchen and servants' hall. The drawing-room was immense and had a fine view of the harbour. A full-sized grand piano stood quite small in a corner. Fine china and furniture everywhere. We sighed. Could it be possible—at the price we'd quoted as our maximum? . . . *How much?* *Eight guineas?* My God! Was the boy mad? Didn't the impossible person realise we'd said four and a half guineas? Shrugs, gestures! Perhaps. . . .

But in the end our luck held good—a nice comparatively clean, comfortable little house, under the sheltering lea of the Castle, pleasantly furnished, with a little rock garden and a tiny lawn at the back, nice neighbours, and it was called "Maryville"!

Somewhat as in the case of the brown, cardboardy hills of Quetta, so is there something about the grey

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drabness of Dover which, before many days are gone, begins to grow pleasantly upon you. Before very long you begin to realise that it's not really a dirty, squalid little town at all, but a very busy, friendly, attractive little town; with its grey, wind-swept esplanade, its tall white cliffs and shingly waterfront, its fine bandstand and enclosure where military bands from the garrison perform, and a thousand and one other major and minor attractions for you to find.

Then there are the Docks, and there, I think, is the real attraction—the hustling, busy quays, the quaint assortment of the smaller ocean-going craft, from the noisy little tramp steamer to the great Norwegian sailing barques full to the brim of timber and planks; cranes, too, and derricks, hawsers, dockers, all so busy pulling, wrenching, lifting, lowering; loading, unloading, stacking, packing; muddy streets, smells, drays, lorries, coal-dust, dogs, children. Movement everywhere, life, activity, bustle; something always doing, something to watch, something of interest, amusing.

And the fishing! The big attraction for me. No finer place than Dover if you want a bit of sea fishing; and if you want to do it on your feet I doubt if it can be bettered, with its piers and its moles and its long waterfront. A paradise for the fisherman with a squeamish stomach. Besides, hiring a boat is no inexpensive item.

It did not take me long before I'd discovered Rylands, the fishing-tackle shop in that dirty narrow Snargate Street, and had been fitted out with the necessary paraphernalia. A terrible lot of stuff it seemed—two rods, two reels, two lines, gimps, hooks, leads, bait, no end to it. There was a fund of wisdom and advice awaiting, too, in Mr. Ryland. He had

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something ready for everything, a most kindly and helpful gentleman, a terrific optimist. Never did I inquire, but the weather was just the thing; no day that was not worth the trying, no weather too bad. A great salesman. How many shillings' worth of bait did I not buy and waste? And who wouldn't have it so? If a fisherman wants to fish he's going to fish. So why deter him? Surely it's better to send him off inclined to break into a run with story of the twenty-pound bass brought in for weighing over-night, rather than try and put him off by tale of the forty anglers who toiled all day and caught nothing—save tiddlers. Besides the other's good for another six penn'orth of bait, so why spoil trade?

In addition to the two rods there was also a little bell for each, the which you clipped on to the end and thereby saved yourself a deal of trouble. For having cast your line and bait out to sea, you could lean the rod against some convenient rest, and go away and smoke and read, or anything else you preferred when there was nothing doing. And when a fish happened along and took your bait he also rang the bell, and you just sauntered forth and wound him in.

Of course, you should clip on the bell after the line is thrown, and the rod rested and everything ready for the fish whenever he should be so minded. But, naturally, you can't spot everything at once, and no more did I till too late, and both my little bells a good deal further out to sea than ever I got the lead and bait that day. Indeed, these latter seemed far more minded to entwine themselves securely round the top of the rod rather than fly out where I wanted them to go. Even after these two lessons it was none too easy always to remember. So that, after casting another half-dozen little bells away, I took to those which

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could be securely fastened on and thereby saved myself much expense and no little vexation.

There were unlimited places from which to fish. There was the Alexandra Pier, the Admiralty Jetty, the Mole, the beach. I tried the former as a go off, for you could arrive comfortably in your car, pay your six-pence—threepence to go on and threepence to fish—and there you were, as snug and easy as anything. The pier itself seemed about half a mile long, and you could cast from anywhere you wanted. Which I did, from innumerable different places, and succeeded in catching nothing but tiddlers.

Nor was I alone in my efforts. Sometimes there were two or three of us, sometimes scores, according to the day and tide. I used to watch these others closely and thereby learnt somewhat of the lie of the land. For that was the best you could do. There was no use in asking. They were like a lot of clams. A most friendly crowd, and always ready for a chat or to pass the time of day. But as to their bag, well, nothing doing! There were bags enough, plenty of them and to spare, but what was inside was for the owner's private information entirely, and nothing to do with you at all. You might stand by and, here and there, see a fish hauled in. And that was as much as you'd see, because he'd be very quickly stowed away in the little rush bag, and how many more there were inside was only for the guessing.

So presently I turned my attention to the Mole, for there I began to learn was where the better fish were caught. And this I gleaned mainly from an old angler, an ancient Captain of Infantry, who'd fished these parts for half a century. He was kindness itself and put me up to quite a wrinkle or two. But he omitted to mention the Eastern Battery, away out on this self-

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same Mole. Which in due course I discovered for myself, and found it a most excellent place from which to make an almost certain bag.

So that later on, when my ancient friend found me installed in his most favourite spot, I've an idea he'd have willingly pushed me in. However, instead, he set about to be more helpful than ever and teach me all he knew. And a wonderful angler I found him to be. Many a time have I watched him with a heavy eighteen-foot salmon rod, balanced precariously in a stiffish wind on top of the bastion, plying a sand-eel among the bass twenty to forty feet beneath him, and hauling them merrily in, and he well on the other side of eighty. It was more than ever I had the hardihood to take on.

In due course I learnt much of the art of the thing. For instance, I learnt that the hour before and the hour after high tide were the best times for fishing, save in the single case where bass were schooling. Then, there were the days and the tides, times when the different sorts of fish were in, times when fish were taking, times when they were not. And there was the right time of the year, the right fish to fish for, and the right bait for the right type of fish. For it's a nice juicy bit of king rag on a ground line you'll need for pouting or a bass; and a sand worm or slip of herring for a dab or other flat fish. And when the pollock are running it'll be a dangling bait this time and a merrily twisting sand worm; whilst a ground-bait of king rag will as likely as not be the mere plaything of the omnipresent and pestiferous crab. Then there's the lead, and a terribly heavy one at that, if you're fishing out on the Mole, when the current's running strong and the fish biting like the devil; and that's the time when a nice, fat lug-worm will set

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the codling speeding out to sea, and your rod and reel and everything into the bargain, if you're not jolly careful about it.

Indeed, you've got to be mighty careful when there's no rail to lean your rod upon. It's got to be very securely fixed. There was a man fishing next to me on the Admiralty Jetty one day, and he'd a nice salmon rod hung out for the passing pollock. There was little doing at the moment and I'd wandered down to pass the time of day with him, and find out if he was having any better luck than I. And hardly had I got there than, *swish!—bang!—plosh!* and into the sea that rod had gone. Never shall I forget his face—puzzled, vaguely pathetic, a sort of childish surprise, as if some invisible being had suddenly landed him a healthy kick from behind. It was really rather difficult not to laugh. I remember we tried all manner of means of getting at it, but without any success. And here's a queer coincidence if you like, for I was actually present on that very same spot when, six months later, at least, another angler fished out that identical rod on his tangled line, and it was hardly a bit the worse from its long immersion.

One of my old soldiers, a Private Grainger, and better known as the regimental barber, who joined the Service at about the same time as I, used often to come out fishing with me. He was the most ardent of fishermen. No weather would deter him, and what he didn't know about the game wasn't worth the learning. He had a regular arsenal of tackle—rods, hand-lines, night-lines, crab-nets, gimp. And as, in his opinion, there was no beer that was not worth the drinking, so, too, was there no fish either that was not worth the catching. Personally I drew the line at eels. I've always hated the things, the muck they make of your line, the

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time you have to spend unravelling them and clearing them off your hook. Or a huss! He was almost as bad, a horrible brute with ghastly dead eyes, in shape and look not unlike a shark. The first one I caught gave me quite a shock. I'd never heard of the things, though later I saw them being sold by the cart-load in the town. It looked as if it had come half out of the grave. I told Grainger about it, but apparently his opinion differed considerably from mine. "Ah," he assured me, "they give you a fine bit of sport," and added, with almost a smack of lips: "an' they eats very sweet." Which, indeed, was his view about any sort or kind of fish; it either ate sweet, or sweetish, or very sweet. One or other denomination. Personally, I have never met any fish yet, save perhaps Lobster Neuburg, which tasted anything even approaching sweet, and there I'm not too certain whether it's the flavouring, after all, and not the lobster.

Fishing for schooling bass was the greatest fun. At certain times of the year, July and August I think it was, at dead-low water, the harbour entrance, just off the Eastern Battery, would be fairly alive with them, and a multitude of gulls as well, all hard after the swarming fry. A narrow ledge, scarcely more than a couple of feet wide, and worn and slippery at that, skirted the curve of the fort a short way out to sea. It lay at about a point midway between the top of bastion and the water-line when tide was high. A somewhat perilous place, but a fine one from which to ply a sandeel or trace of brit. This latter is a tiny artificial minnow, silvery-green in colour and a deadly bait if the fish are taking. You work him very much as you work a wet fly, a couple or three of them on your cast, drawing them along back and forth, back and forth, and then suddenly there's a flash of silver and you're

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into a bass, and away your reel goes with a spin. And, sometimes, when they're really greedy, you'll get a couple or even three on at a time; and then you'll have to heave till your back's nearly breaking and your rod is almost bent in two.

But I liked best of all to fish for them on the outgoing tide. For one thing they seemed to run bigger. You could use a shorter rod, swinging the lead and trace well into the swiftly flowing stream and letting the line run out awhile. Then slowly reeling in suddenly there'd be a jerk and the rod would be nearly dragged out of your hands. And then you'd reel and reel till you'd got your silvery bass kicking on the surface at your feet, and then round with him as hard as you could go to the battery steps and drag him in.

My wife and I and a friend would often do this. We'd take it in turns, crawling out with the greatest care and discretion to the ledge's perilous end, coming helter-skelter back without either care or caution, dragging a heavy rod and splashing fish behind. Yet a single slip or a false step, and over the edge into that racing tide, had meant drowning for absolute certain. Indeed, it's queer, when you come to think of it, what fools imagination can make of us. As if a couple of feet wasn't room enough and to spare! Yet often, when there was nothing doing to take one's thoughts away, looking down upon that depth of sea beneath my feet, I've clutched at the wall behind and hated it all exceedingly. And that's why you'll so often find the outstandingly brave man so comparatively lacking in imagination. It's that wretched thing, imagination, which makes such cowards of most of us.

The first time we went bass fishing with artificial minnow we struck nothing but that infernal fellow the horse mackerel. And being the first time we'd met

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him, and mistaking him for the real thing, were thrilled to the marrow. They bit and bit, and we caught and caught. And having bagged some three score and more, we tied them up in a noble bundle, thinking how pleased the "married families" would be with them. I've somewhat of an idea it was as we chugged homewards in the smelly little motor-boat together with some half-dozen other anglers we'd picked up at various points along the Mole, that vague doubts about these fish began to assail my mind. Somehow it seemed to me the glances cast towards our bundle, far too big to go into any bag, were not full of that latent envy which one would have expected; but, rather, vaguely sly, almost as if it were a hint of mild amusement lay at the bottom of it.

Moreover, it seemed to me, as we made our way along the wharves towards the car, that other discreet smiles and glances followed behind us in our wake. However, my wife being of an optimistic nature, I duly handed the bundle over to Grainger in barracks next morning, with instructions to him to distribute them at his discretion. Indeed, I felt quite a benefactor. And Grainger, being the perfect soldier, received them without even so much as a smile. But later, when enlightenment had come my way, I made offhand inquiry. For a moment he was obviously non-plussed and far from comfortable. And then seeing, no doubt, somewhat of a twinkle in my eye: "Well, sir," he explained, and his grey eyes twinkled back at me, "I reckoned the incinerator was the best place for them." And added, no doubt for my greater ease and comfort: "Not but what they'd have made a nice bit of manure for them as like it." You see, you don't eat horse mackerel. He's got a skin like leather and a taste like nothing on earth. He was the one fish I

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came across which, to Private Grainger, did *not* eat sweet.

The bass in these parts run very big, well over fifteen pounds or so. But these you only get fishing from a boat, or from the beach, or at night. And the first, as in Bermuda, was quite beyond me; and the second—well, that'll come later; whilst in the third I could see no fascination at all. One of the mechanics in Mr. Niblett's garage, where I kept my car, used to spend night after night out on the Mole; and met with considerable luck if the tales of big fish he told me were to be relied upon. But how anybody in their normal senses, even when catching fine fish, could find pleasure in spending a damp and chilly night on a wind-swept and shelterless Mole, was quite beyond my comprehension.

My biggest bass scaled seven pounds, and I got him after a terrific fight from the familiar Battery ledge, and then only because a crab-net happened to be handy. It had been cloudy and a trifle gusty when we had started, but by the time I caught that fish it was blowing half a gale. And shortly before the frail little motor-boat was due, as fine a squall had descended upon us as I have ever known. It was impossible to stand in the full force of it. Sheets of spray scudded across a storm-tossed harbour. Everything was obliterated from sight. Fortunately the motor-boat had not started, for no craft so frail could have lived a moment in so prodigious a sea.

Nor did it show any signs of waning. The average storm of this kind is of short duration, but this one went steadily on, worse and worse instead of better and better, and showed no signs whatever of abating. It began to look unpleasantly like a night where we stood, and a murky one at that, with no food, nothing

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but a mackintosh, and for shelter what little the Battery could provide.

Then at the last moment luck came our way, in the shape of a pilot boat, which, drawing in under lea of the fort, proceeded to lie up in attendance on some incoming vessel shortly due to arrive. To get it to lift us across to the Admiralty Wharf, a couple of hundred yards across the way, seemed an easy matter. But at once two difficulties arose. First the pilot's orders were stringent, and permitted of no conveyance of "joy-riders" or itinerant fishermen. The pilot scratched his head. He was a good-natured soul and obviously torn between two issues: (1) in his capacity of Government official inexorably tethered to instructions, yet (2) being human, still somewhat anxious to succour a fellow-being. Eventually, when we put it to him that we really were much akin to a ship in distress, being indeed very sadly marooned and in great discomfort, he overcame his doubts and very kindly consented to drop us where we wanted.

And then the second difficulty arose. For the friend who was with me had a fixed and somewhat fragile elbow-joint, a pleasant little relic of the War, and we had not foreseen that our normal manner of embarkation via the stone steps was out of the question, and that if we were going to do anything about it at all we'd got to do it by means of the very frail-looking iron ladder affixed to the wall nearby. And regarding that lively bobbing boat, the frail means of getting there, and that fragile arm, the matter seemed as good as hopeless.

However, desperate situations require desperate solutions. So after a little experimenting it was decided, rather than spend the night out there, to have a shot at it. But I must say I heaved a great sigh of

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relief when a kindly wave placed the boat right up against my friend's very feet, and with great acumen he stepped nimbly aboard as clean and neat as any experienced A.B. It would have been awful to see him break his arm.

On the matter of my own arrival in the boat let me draw a veil. When we'd all picked ourselves out of the tangle in which my sudden and precipitate advent had involved us, and when my shin-bone and the knuckles of both hands had ceased from aching most unmercifully, we searched our pockets for half-crowns, proffered our heartfelt thanks, and presently parted company with our kindly friend, and set forth as cheerfully as might be against a sixty-mile gale, that infernal seven-pound bass (which, incidentally, I nearly threw away) and all the fishing paraphernalia on our shoulders, and a good two-mile trudge to where we'd left the car at the other end of the harbour.

In process of strolling down the town one day, I observed in a shop window across the way a most marvellous display of silver cups and trophies; and thinking perhaps some local Sports or Horse Show impended, wandered across and pressed my nose, in company with a various assortment of urchins, against the panes. And there read to my surprise: "Dover Angling Festival," or words to that effect, which at first I thought to be a mistake, for the mightiest of silver trophies, and lesser ones by the score—cups, goblets, tankards—lay there. But, reading here and there, soon discovered that the Angling Festival and these fine trophies were very definitely associated; for example, this double-handed urn, a good two feet high or more, was for the individual catching some particular fish or other, and this great silver pot for the biggest bag of fish, and so forth and so on.

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My curiosity aroused, I made inquiries. It seemed that for two consecutive days—annually—I think it was—this great competition went on. There were all manner of events, both local and open, catches from boats, catches from the wharves, individual types of fish, total bags. Nothing was forgotten, nothing overlooked. Everybody and everything was catered for. If you competed from the shore you drew your place and, according to the number, there you found your half-dozen paces laid out for you; and there you settled yourself down and left the fish to do their best or their worst by you. A good deal of luck you'd say, and I expect there was, but a tremendous amount of friendly enthusiasm for all that, and enjoyed by score upon score of enthusiasts, both male and female, old and young.

The run on bait during this period was prodigious, and not a hope of getting any if you hadn't ordered well in advance. And so for two whole days a motley crowd stood, and sat, and crouched, and heaved, and struck, and baited, and unhooked; and presently, when the allotted time had come, returned and weighed in. And the little man with the goggles went off with the enormous double-handled trophy, well nigh as big as himself, having weighed in with fifteen pounds of pouting; and an enormous broad-shouldered individual, with half a ton of paraphernalia and a voice like a fog-horn, having accidentally got into a twenty-pound conger, went off with another pot, and everybody as pleased as Punch. Indeed, they are real good fun these angling competitions, full of a friendly, optimistic, cheery good-fellowship; and if you think there's a lack of exercise in it go and try a day out on the Mole for yourself; and should you be half as stiff as I was the first time I went out, you'll not feel you've

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done too bad. And there's a salty ozone, too, going into you the whole time, fit to keep you "yat," as John Ridd would say, till you're well beyond the allotted three score years and ten.

I once thought I'd join the tribe of beach-fishers. One heard so much of their doings. Fine bass and codling abounded there, and were, apparently, caught in large quantities, if my old friend Grainger could be relied on. It was he who told me of the individual who, having put his rod down upon the shelving shingle and wedged it tight with a couple of pieces of concrete from the neighbouring breakwater, saw it a moment later shoot off from under his very feet and, before he could do anything about it, had disappeared out to sea, and was lost for ever. And this I believe to be an entirely true story and one to be relied on. It only went to show what apparently could be done.

So out I went one late October evening, and a horribly damp one, too, it was, a pocket torch to aid me with the baiting when it should get too dark. And presently, arriving on a steep and shingly beach a couple of hours before dusk set in, found there a stormy sea running and the spray coming up like fine rain. Nor was I alone. Already half a dozen others were established there. Grateful for their company I took my place among them and baited up. For a good hour I fished—and caught nothing. Nothing, that's to say, in the fish line. The amount of seaweed I caught was incredible. Another half-hour and yet nothing happened. Indeed, for the life of me I couldn't see how, in that raging, weed-infested sea, anything possibly could happen. Yet something must be doing, else why those other anglers? For by this time dozens more must have arrived. You could pick

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out their little glimmering lights far away down the shore.

So it got darker and darker, and my feet and hands grew colder and colder, till at last I couldn't feel my finger-tips at all; so that, about this time, the chances of baiting up with a finger or a thumb in place of a slippery bit of king rag were just about three to one. Yet all the time more and more dark forms, projecting rods and glimmering bicycle lamps, kept going slipping by behind me in the shingle. I, too, should have had a bicycle lamp. My wretched little torch was clean out of it. It got dimmer and dimmer. The steady roar of the surf grew louder and louder. Frequently in the dimness of it all I got trapped by a sousing breaker; it was almost impossible to keep time, on that slippery bank of icy shingle, with the swiftly incoming tide. I was wet to the knees. I was fed up! Heroics or no heroics, I'd had enough! These dim forms beside me weren't human beings at all. They were giants, Brobdingnagians, gods amongst men! Let the bass or codling run to any size! It was up stick for me, and home!

That was the first and last time I tried the beach. What I liked best was that snug Battery with its sheltering bastions and its sunny corners, where you could sit at peace with yourself and in comfort, and smoke a pipe at ease and wait for the little bells to begin to ring. Then all of a sudden they'd be off—*tinkle, tinkle! tinkle, tinkle!* and, with a glance at your watch to find the hour before high tide was upon you, and your rod-tops jerking like the devil, you'd be up and pulling in dab and pouting as fast as you could re-bait and cast your line.

We always reckoned, if possible, to clear expenses—a matter of a couple of shillings for the boat and

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eighteen-pennyworth of bait—with what we managed to catch. And, so long as we provided for three meals, we reckoned it out about even. But one day we were badly down. Two or three tiny fish, nothing more. The bass weren't running, the pouting microscopic. Just nothing doing! An empty bag, and the boat shortly due. It was most depressing. And then suddenly one of my rods gave a terrific lurch, the bell went off with a furious tinkle. I hurled myself upon it and struck. There was a heavy drag from the far end. A moment I feared I was badly hitched up, then slowly the line began to come in. Excitement became intense. There was no doubt it was a fish of sorts. That was obvious from the jerks at the line. But it was something different to anything I'd ever met before—a slow, heavy drag with little quivers to it. For the life of me I couldn't make it out. But it was equally obvious a big 'un, and as the line came slowly in, so our excitement became more intense. Slowly it came in—slowly—slowly. . . . Suddenly beneath the dirty harbour scum a dark form became dimly visible. Steadily I heaved. Next moment a huge lobster was lashing furiously on the water surface some twenty feet below.

And now we were in a proper fix. The Battery steps lay a good fifty yards away. It was a thousand to one the hook was only lightly stuck. To try and drag him to the steps was far too risky. Even if one tried, and got him there, the risk of having a finger bitten off by those great snapping claws, in an effort to grab him and pull him in, would have been one more than I'd have cared to try. Yet, to try and lift him was as good as bidding farewell to him then and there. And then someone a bit brighter than the rest of us set off in search of a crab-net—and, what's more, found one. A

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moment later we'd got it lowered and beneath that lobster, and before he knew where he was we'd got him thrashing and kicking on the Battery floor.

He weighed eight pounds, and never better lobster have I eaten. Moreover, we reckoned he'd stood us a good two days' fishing at least.

CHAPTER XII

INDIA AGAIN

THE longer you live in India, the more you get to know it, the more immense does it seem to become, the more horrible the complexity of its problems. The present problem! Self-government. The answer. Who knows it? How many of us discuss it, now many of us understand? What of the man in the street, the man who's never been there? What of the Government official, the politician who's done his little tour from home? What has he seen of it? What does he know? You, too, like them may go and tour the cities and the towns, visit the Palace of a nabob, explore the alley-ways of Simla. And there in the town-bred, city-bred masses you will get a superficial smattering of sorts. You will come upon opulence and comfort, squalor and beggary and poverty. You will see fine streets, fine shops, magnificent institutions, wonderful houses; and you will see narrow streets, sordid and filthy, street booths, tumble-down edifices, unclean tenements. And you'll draw your conclusions, and pointing to the magnificent railway systems and roadways and irrigation schemes, and ignorant, or forgetful maybe, of why or how it has all come about, at whose behest, say to yourself, surely this at least is a nation that can rule itself? And yet the heart and soul of it you have not touched, the seething

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millions who till the soil for scanty living, who place implicit trust and confidence in the British Raj and desire no other ruler.

If there is any way of bringing the ordinary individual a bit into touch with this great heart of India it is shikhar—shooting, fishing, pigsticking. Even the little I did, being only ten years in the land and of the British Service, and therefore not over glib with the tongue, even that little showed me much, taught me to realise at least how little one knew about it all. A simple, fairly hard-working people these, full, no doubt, of the cruelties and vices inherent to uncivilisation, and apt to get easily out of hand with foolish treatment, as in the nature of children; for, indeed, they are little more either in thought or intelligence. But what struck me most, must, indeed, strike anyone who sees it, is their gravity. So different to the Chink who's always got a ready smile, who's so easily amused. There you've but to get a man in a section of fours to trip and tumble and you'll have a difficult and hostile crowd laughing like a lot of children, and thereafter quite easy to handle.

But not so the Indian. You'd never do that with him. His gravity is beyond the ordinary joke. He will smile, diffidently, and at times I've heard him laugh; and, toddy-filled, I've seen him make as big an ass of himself as you could wish, and in the villages and bazaars you'll hear some sounds of singing and some small amount of laughter. But gravity is the key-note, gravity or sullenness. And why? Inherent nature? No. Two very different reasons. First, the indelible brand of ancient tyranny, oppression, and cruelty, through centuries of successive waves of conquest; of savage princes and merciless rulers; a terrible brand which even a century of British rule

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has failed entirely to obliterate—the Past! And second, the bonyar; and there you have the Present and the Future! An evil creature beyond belief, difficult to control, for who can stay a fool, or yet a desperate man who really means to borrow? A hard, rapacious brute he is, as is in the nature of the usurer, greedy and cunning and cruel, servile and cringing when he's cornered, tyrant of the damndest when the table's turned.

The Indian farmer tills the fields, yet who among them owns either crops or land? Bad harvests, improvidence, ill-luck, the marriage system have all combined to ruin him. The latter alone is enough to ruin any man. Custom binds him. Marriage means a feast. A feast means open hospitality to meanest and most distant of relative, whom death alone will stop from being there. Birth control is unknown. Families multiply. There comes the marriage feast, a second and yet a third. From whence the money? One source alone—the bonyar, the money-lender. And his price—two per cent per mensem! Work that out. Twenty-four per cent per annum! A borrowed hundred pays itself back in interest in four years, or in the case of the farmer, the labourer, the syce, the sweeper—India's working-classes, its millions—a debt accruing, slowly, inexorably, year in year out, possessions gradually going, everything gradually gone, no longer independent, dependent now, a serf, little other than a slave. Thenceforward the bonyar takes all, harvest, wages, kind, and in return to preserve both goose and golden eggs, doles out the pittances of food, or minor loan that custom bringing in so much wealth shall endure.

One very small issue among so many and so great. Yet is it all so small? Who the potential leaders of

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to-day? The great Princes, recent in descent from despotic forbears; the bonyars and ex-bonyars—the contractors and merchants, their sons and their sons' sons these, the educated classes now, members of Congress, some part the Legislative Assembly itself. Is it time to hand them yet the reins? Have they yet learnt sufficiency of sense, humanity and legislation? Will they for this reason cease to grind? A fearsome problem this! I wonder? . . .

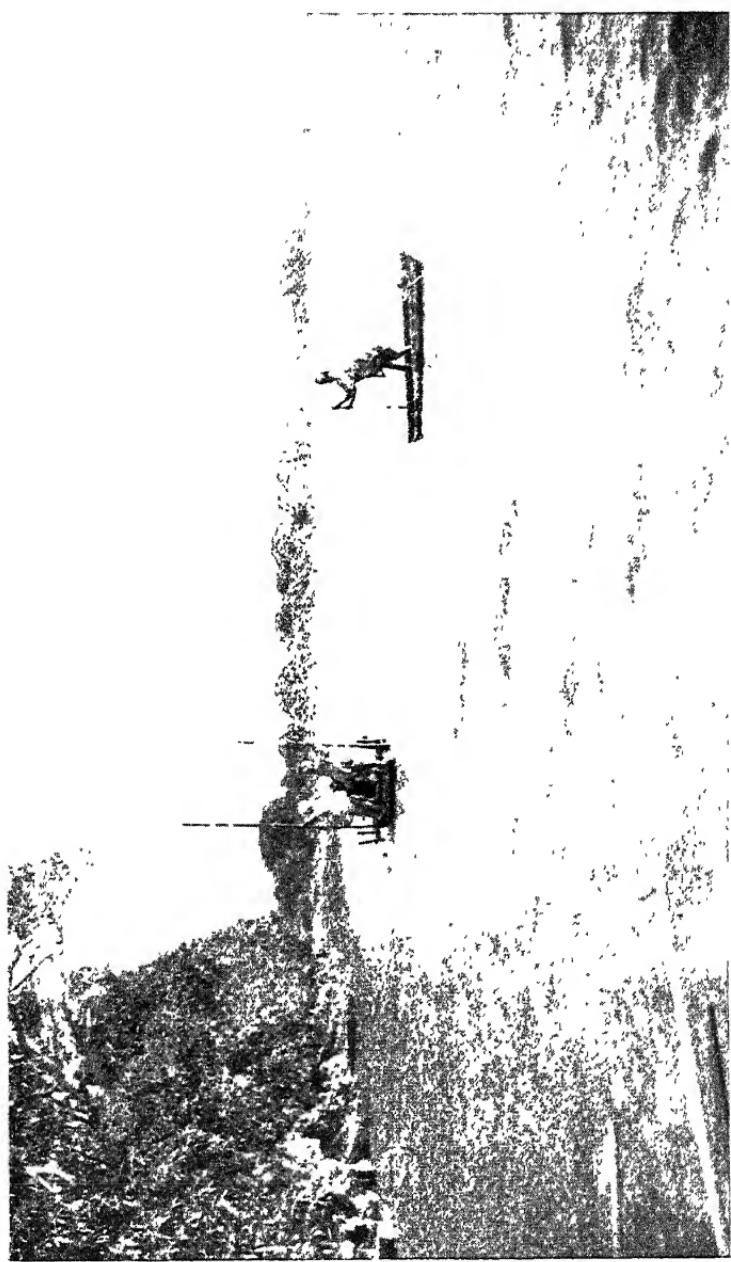
My last four years in this great country were spent in India proper, the Provinces of the Plains as distinct from the Provinces of the Frontier. Here the motor car comes into its own. Motors and buses and lorries flourish. Roads, good, bad and indifferent, are everywhere; the great trunk roads linking up the Empire, the minor roads spidering away from village, town and city. And so the primitive transport of the hills is left behind, and with it, God be praised! the camel.

My last impressions of that infernal beast are in connection with a shoot at Nushki, the headquarters of that desert line linking up with Persia. Some twenty miles away there lies a little jheel, deep in the heart of sand and desert, a favourite stopping-place for the passing flocks of duck, geese and teal. The chiefest difficulty is getting there. Occasional shoots are organised by the local Politicals, but these are well out of the province of the ordinary man. So you can imagine my delight on being asked to one being got up by the local E.A.C. There were six guns in all, four Colonels, myself, and a young Captain, commander of the local garrison of Indian infantry. We arrived over-night, so that we might start next day at crack of dawn, and were bidden to dine with our kindly host, the E.A.C. (Extra Assistant Com-

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missioner), an Afghan gentleman and a personage of no small interest being, indeed, of direct descent from a deposed Afghan king—Yakub Khan, I think it must have been who being defeated by General (afterwards Field-Marshal Earl) Roberts after the murder of the Resident and his escort at Kabul in 1879, abdicated, was sent to India, and there lived out the rest of his life in peace and comfort.

We were ushered in and duly introduced. My memory fails me here, but I have vague recollections of a large and swarthy man, certainly most hospitable. The house was small, the room we dined in tiny. A long narrow table, laid with cloth and eating-things—loaned, it leaked out later, from the *dak* bungalow and Company Mess—occupied the centre of the room. Round this we took our seats, our host at top, one of our Colonels on either side of him, the rest of us squeezed in as best we could. Then presently, after somewhat of a pause, a door opened and in came a most enormous dish, piled high with a smoking heap of chicken *pilau*. This was duly passed round and from it we helped ourselves. It reminded me enormously of a lucky dip. There must have been the bits of a dozen chickens there at least. Ends protruded in all directions out of the mound of rice and raisins. You got hold of one and gave a tug, and you didn't know till you'd got it out whether it was going to be a wing, or leg, or even a parson's nose. One of the Colonels at top of the table had obviously got the latter, for I noticed the E.A.C scooping away for dear life among the rice and bits; and presently, extracting in his finger-tips the piece which, from the smile upon his face, he sought, placed it gravely upon his guest's plate, removing the offending morsel and tossed it carelessly into a



Indoor Shoot—
Off to the Butts

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corner. It struck one as a kindly and thoughtful attention, but I really wasn't a bit sorry to be sitting where I was.

Presently, what remained of the *pilau* having been removed, there followed a seemingly endless series of saucerfuls of the quaintest dishes, highly coloured, completely flavourless, and so sweet as to be almost nauseating. Down at our end we held a series of competitions to try and spot the ingredients; and, though I don't think anybody exactly won, we had lingering suspicions of Bird's custard, almond essence, tapioca, grape-nuts, rice, pearl barley, cocoa essence, and toffee.

Towards the end of the meal the heat had become positively overwhelming. Apart from the excessive number of occupants, the windows were obviously hermetically sealed, whilst a couple of charcoal *sigiris* burned merrily in a corner. I'd commenced the meal unfortunately with an all-powerful thirst, but towards the end it had become positively excruciating. And this because, though there was any amount of beverage in the shape of soda-water, something had obviously gone pretty wrong with the chlorination of that particular brew. The first gulp I took very nearly blew the head clean off my shoulders. It was sheer impossibility to drink the stuff. Neither had one heart to disturb our kindly host, nor temerity to ask for water and chance the cholera. I'd not like to say how much we drank when we got back to camp.

Early next morning we were off in the rising dawn. Our cavalcade was mainly camels. In fact, as far as I remember, I was the only one who rode a pony. The four Colonels were big men, approaching years of discretion, and well covered; so perhaps their

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selection was induced as much by pity for the little beasts, as their own loss of dignity in bestriding them. But I, being thin of shank and young, and in no immediate risk of loss of dignity, bestrode my little "tat"; and presently, at the end of the first twelve miles and a good two hours gone, was able to ride around and listen to their groans. For, when you are not used to it, the stretch of those broad saddles is positively devastating. At first, provided your stirrups are right and you don't go dozing off and tumble headlong, it's a comfortable and agreeable way of travelling. And so you go pleasantly jogging along and pleased as anything, till presently the crutch of you begins to ache a little, and then a bit more, and still a little bit more; and, before you know where you are, you're feeling you'll not be standing it a moment longer—except you somehow do.

Which was what our Colonels did, and on we went, grimly without check or halt. And after yet another dozen weary miles across that never-ending desert waste, came suddenly upon the jheel, and as fine a Camp as you could possibly imagine pitched in and out among the tall palm trees. I got there first, having ridden on, and stood in ease and comfort, though slightly saddle-sore, and awaited the slower arrival of my seniors and betters. And presently the leading one arrived and, tumbling stiffly off, stood a moment, legs crutched heavily beneath him; then, with somewhat of a groan, he stumbled off and was lost among the bushes. And presently he emerged, and I was glad to see his face resembling more its beaming self. "Feeling better, Colonel?" I suggested. "Better!" he groaned, "My God, old boy, I thought I'd never manage to do it again!"

I have no memory of exactly how many birds we

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got. It was a very good shoot and we stayed there a couple of nights and seldom have I been more comfortable. Unfortunately our host had been unable to accompany us, but he'd obviously left no stone unturned to see that we were well provided for. A wonderful show, indeed! They know how to do things, these Politicals. How different to the lean fare and sparse comfort of the mere soldier man.

And so one left the chikhār and sisi far behind, and took instead to the quail and partridge of the Plains. Duck and snipe, and sand-grouse too, but never in the quantities we found in Sind. I always preferred walking up a partridge to any other form of shooting. Many are the great days I look back on when my wife and I, three stalwart T.A.'s in the back of the car for beaters, would set forth of an afternoon, and coming to some likely spot, proceed to beat the country-side. Hedgerows between the fields were certain finds while sun was high, guns well up on either flank, beaters behind flogging the bushes, plugging stones. How tight the birds would lie, till suddenly, there'd be a startled *whirr!* and out into the open would come a fine fat partridge, or sometimes two, or even three or four . . . a *bang!* . . . a little bunch of feathers on the ground, or so one hoped, a beater out and on it like a terrier on a rat. Sometimes it would be a hare, and you just didn't dare to miss it. Hares we always regarded as beater's perks. There's nothing T.A. likes better, and a missed one was sheer disaster.

But now the sun is sinking low. Birds are out in the crops and so are we, moving in steady line among the corn and cotton fields, till presently the light begins to go. So in we close and back as hard as we can leg it for the car, and often darkness is upon us

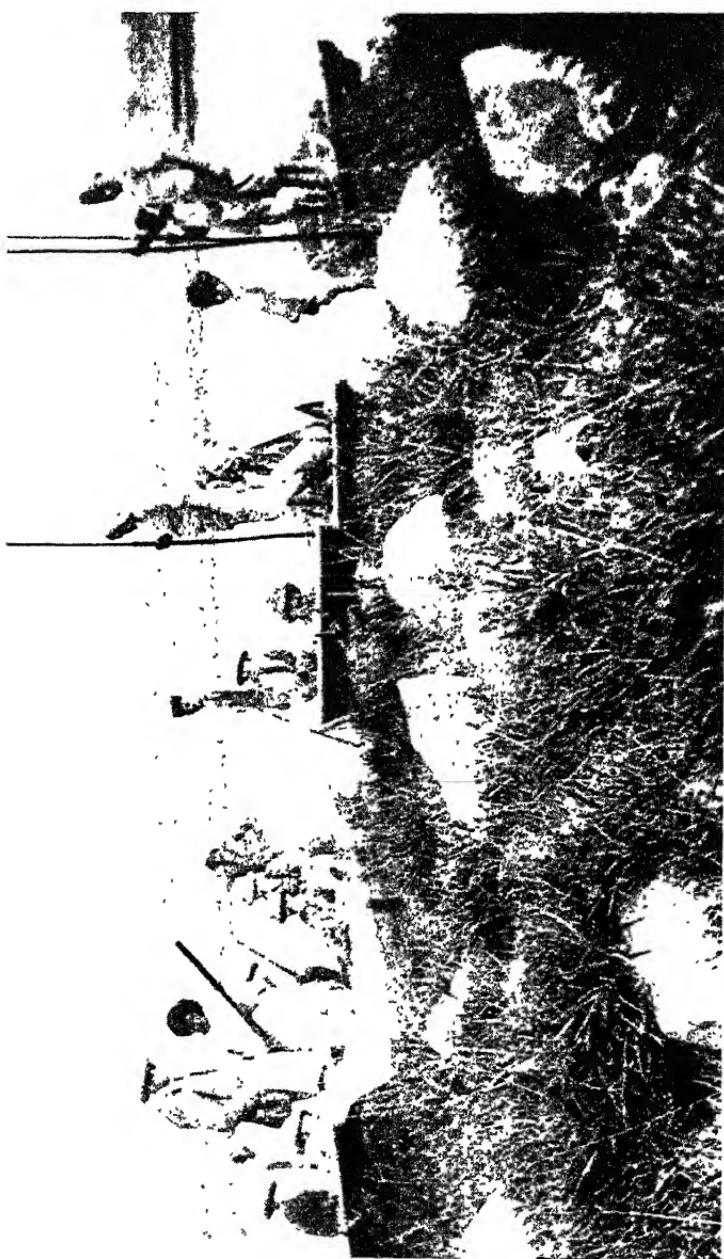
Great Days

long before we get there. Jackets are donned. A well deserved drink all round. A pipe or cigarette, then back into the car and home. A piping hot tub, and there's still time for a short drink before the dinner hour comes round.

One hears much of the big shoots in India, those to which dozens of guns are invited. But only twice during my brief stay did I attend one. Those two occasions were at the annual Christmas shoot given by the Maharajah of Indore. The jheel lay some twenty miles from Mhow, and setting forth in the dark, in an open car, and a temperature somewhere below zero, was no joke at all. Breakfast was served and ready, for anyone who wished it, in an enormous *shamian* close down by the water edge, a great rectangular tent, easily able to seat a hundred guests or more. Other smaller tents were ranged on either side where you could wash or change, or even sleep if you cared to arrive the night before.

So, breakfast eaten, out you'd stroll, over to where at a table the Master of Ceremonies was seated. Near him and all along the edge of the jheel was marshalled a swarm of boats or dug-outs; and all around a host of other guns, Indian officials, attendants, and watermen. From the gentleman at the table you got a card intimating the number of your butt, a boat would be allotted—two of these tiny dug-outs lashed together—and a couple of others to act as pickers-up and beaters. Then in you'd get, one foot in either boat, and seating yourself on the heap of rushes piled where the two sides joined, and gun and cartridges safely stowed, away you'd go to your allotted place.

The first time I did it I was half-way to my butt before I realised that it was water and not, as I'd been thinking, wind which was coming up between



*Off on a shoot up the Nerbudda
River—Khalghat*

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the boards. Indeed, I was most uncomfortably soused by then, and as near as took a header trying to get something a bit more waterproof beneath me.

The butts for the most part were small platforms some six feet by two, built in amongst the reeds, and raised on wooden piles to just above the water level. Mine must have been a bit rotten and decayed, for it rocked about in a most alarming manner. The platform itself was surrounded by a thin screen of rushes coming to just about the level of the head, and so flimsily put together that a good deal of one's time was taken up in keeping it from carrying away into the water. Getting out of the frail craft and into the butt was no mean feat, and once in and the door closed upon one, it was remarkably like being in a box with the lid off and barely room to turn. So little room, indeed, that in getting things sorted out it was a constant toss up whether one wouldn't go headlong through the screen and plop into the water.

However, everything at last is fixed and ready, the boatmen gone to ground, and still a quarter of an hour yet to go. Just time for a peep over the screen and a quick glimpse of the view before the fun begins. Away to front, about half a mile or so, lies the outline of the dam, tall trees and palms everywhere, the white glint of tents among them. In between a stretch of open water, glinting and sparkling in the winter sun, and everywhere among the reedy edges a host of coot and duck, preening themselves, diving, washing, filling the air with a low quacking sound. Not so far away on the left is a little coppiced island. On its foremost edge another butt just shows. Beyond it and behind a maze of reedy channels spreads away to

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deeper belts of water and shallow swamps beyond. A hundred yards or so away on my right is another butt. The occupant is dreadfully late. He's an Indian gentleman, terribly fat. He'll hardly be in time. He's in process of being pushed and heaved out of his flimsy craft, apparently before it sinks. What a tussle! Will he do it? By Jove, no!—yes—well done! He's up—and in . . . the flimsy door has closed upon him. It must be touch and go if the platform stands his weight. How it does it I don't know.

So minutes fly. . . . A distant *Boom!* The gun!—or was it? . . . Yes, by gad, it was! Suddenly on the far horizon the air is dark with birds. A distant *crack!* of gun . . . another . . . half a dozen more. Then suddenly the jheel's ablaze, a perfect fusillade of guns. The sky is thick with duck. Birds seem to rise from everywhere. Pack after pack go streaming by. It's like a swarm of locusts—mallard and pintail, pochard of every sort and kind, flight upon flight of teal.

Within ten minutes the gun's gone red hot in one's hands. Yet birds keep streaming in. In they come from all directions. One's like a blooming marionette the way one twists and turns. Back begins to ache, shoulders ache. There's a horrible crick in the neck from chronic looking up. Eyes ache with so much staring into sky and sun, and ears with constant crack of gun. Thus for a good hour it goes on, this wondrous rush of duck; then slowly trails off as birds begin to leave in search of safer home. So that by the time the luncheon hour comes round it's with not too great a reluctance that one leaves the butt and boards the boat again.

For there's no question of eating one's lunch in the butt, whether one would like to or not. Lunch is in the big *shamian*, and a very big item in the day's

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proceedings too. A good eighty-odd of us sit down to a most sumptuous meal, our youthful host, the Mahārajah of Indore, at head of the table. A solid hour or more it lasts. And then such as are so minded get off to their butts again; for many of the butts are a long way off, and so much food and drink are apt to make one sleepy and somewhat disinclined. So presently the maroons begin to boom again, and *crack! crack!* go the guns. But not for long. Indeed, the shoot is as good as over. Most of the birds are gone. And in another hour or so one's had enough and quite ready to count the bag, and home.

It cost me about three hundred cartridges to get my sixty duck. Which sounds pretty poor shooting. But, for reasons of wind and weather, the screens had been put up only a day or so before the shoot, and so the birds being naturally a bit shy, and most of the shooting at extremest range, I feel there was some little excuse. The actual total bag was just over four hundred, which, considering the number of guns, sounds almost incredible. But when one takes into account the fact that many of the butts were little more than "putters up," whilst the majority of the gun's were big-wigs, for many of whom it was the only occasion in the year they'd fire a gun, the result was not really too surprising. For me it was a most exhilarating day, and gave a charming taste of what was meant by "big shooting" before leaving India for good.

But I still preferred the smaller shoots to which I have always been accustomed. For, after all, most of the joy of shooting lies not so much in the kill as in the things about one—here in India the sheer wildness of the country-side, the quiet, easy-going life around, smells, the sounds, so homely and yet so primitive.

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One of my pleasantest memories is of a shoot we often used to do down at a place called Khalghat. It lay on the Nerbudda River, a fifty-mile drive from the little military cantonment of Mhow, and was quite one of the best spots I know in which to spend a few days' shooting leave. An excellent road took one the whole way, being indeed the main trunk road between Delhi and Bombay, a picturesque drive, down the *ghats*—a belt of rugged, heavily wooded mountain country—passing the dusty little native town of Goojeri, where they make the quaintly coloured bits of furniture—wooden bowls, candlesticks, table legs; and so at last to the river.

The Nerbudda is a fine big stream, with water in it the whole year round. It runs mainly in a bed of rock, sometimes sluggish and deep, often in fine and swiftly flowing rapids. At the little village town of Khalghat it is spanned by a great bridge, only recently completed and some three hundred yards across. At each end is a toll-house where, having paid your toll, the gate is raised, permitting you to join in with the slow-moving traffic in process of crossing. And, with a string of a score of *bile-carts*—two-wheeled carts, ox-drawn, and generally terribly over-laden—ahead of you, and not the slightest chance of passing, the process is really slow. But, coming at last to the end, and on up through a narrow, dusty cutting, you swing sharply right at the top, through a pair of gates, and there you are at the foot of the little whitewashed *dak* bungalow.

A hasty wash, a hastier cup of tea, and then away to get a bird or two before the sun is down. For there's a small but excellent jheel not so many miles away, and there are quite a lot of quail and partridge about in the fields. And soon you hear them calling as



Guns and Shikharis—
Jhansi

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slowly the sun begins to sink. And so back home again, with half a dozen brace or so; a quick drink, hot baths, supper. And a mighty good supper, too, round the little, white-clothed table and its evil-smelling lamp, and then to bed to dream of a glorious to-morrow.

And what a to-morrow! How the memory comes back to me—that early morning wakening to welcome cup of tea, the soft crispness in the air, a pleasant smell of burning logs from the cook-house across the way; and through the open window, mingling with the distant roar of the rapids just below, the merry call of a partridge scarce a hundred yards away.

Breakfast as usual is eaten in the dark. Then guns and cartridges are slung, cushions, tiffin baskets, drinks and away down to the river bank in the swiftly breaking dawn. Close by the bridge we pass, picking our way among a host of carts and oxen, some just spanning up, others already on their way. Then down along the sandy track, stumbling in the uncertain light across a waste of stones and boulders to where the boats await us at the river side. So in we get, two guns in one, my wife and I in another, half a dozen beaters from the holiday camp near by in yet a couple more; cartridges and guns and things are stored, cushions arranged, and out we pole and so away.

I always remember this pleasant punt up-stream as one of the best parts of the day. Just to sit there, back propped against a nobbly tiffin basket, and pipe alight, drowsily taking it all in—the soft, rhythmic swish of the puntmen's poles, the glinting stream, dimpled here and there by rising fish, a startled heron dibbling in a bend, a wedge of skimming teal, bunches of little black moorhens busy among the reeds. Presently the stream grows shallower. Banks of tufted reeds

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appear, jagged rocks, tiny islets, cobwebbed and wispy in the early morning dew. And so at last, at the end of a good hour and a half's punting, we come to where the shoot begins. And now it's out and walk. Boats pull in, and out we get, up the high bank, a line is formed, a moment's pause and then away.

And now from everywhere among the grass and crops the partridges are busy calling. There they go—*tita! tita! tita!*—and suddenly a *whirr!* . . . a *bang!* . . . another *bang!*—the same on left and right. On goes the line slowly, steadily, pausing a moment to thrash and stone a patch of scrub; now a halt to get a wounded bird, a thorny *nullah* to be crossed. Then into line again and on . . . a bunch of button-quail, a sudden frantic scrabbling among the scrub, a yell: “Look up, sir!” A peacock! . . . *Bang!*—By gad, he’s got him! And then the roar from Thomas Atkins as he’s down, a rush of feet, a wild hurroosh: he’s even better than a hare, and fortunately one’s allowed to shoot them here.

Till noon we’d keep it up, gradually working round as the sun begins to get too hot to where a clump of mango trees stands a hundred feet above the roar of foaming rapids just beneath. And there we’d find food and drinks laid out, and greatly welcome too at the end of four hours’ solid tramping. A score or so of partridges, a dozen quail, a hare or two. That was our average bag. This time the peacock also. And so to lunch, spread out on the shady turf, and eaten to the distant roar of the stream, the burbling croon of half a dozen little parakeets among the branches, the wailing monotone of a native driving leisure plough across the way, the busy hum of insect life around.

So, lazily on flat of back till four. A cup of tea, then up and off again, homewards along the bank, till

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slowly the sun begins to sink, lower and ever lower, a moment hangs flamingly upon a distant hill, and then is gone. And now it's time to close, and clamber down to where the boats are keeping lazy pace, before the darkness overwhelms us. And in we bundle, pipes and cigarettes are lit, and down the sluggish stream we drop, in crimson after-glow, golden a while then silver, as presently a half-fledged moon comes slowly up beyond the far horizon and lights us pleasantly on our homeward way.

There are some very fine fish to be caught in this great stream, mahseer and murrel up to any weight. Often one would see them being hawked about the village street. I did very little fishing during my time in India. One used to hear tales of mighty rainbow trout caught among the distant Kashmir hills. And how I'd long to get there. But difficulties of leave and funds always managed somehow to get in the way. There are fine trout, too, among the Nilgiris of Southern India. Twice I fished a pretty little stream, by name of Avalanche, during a short stay up at Wellington. But it was over-late in the season and, save for a lot of five-inch yearlings, I got only three trout worth the keeping, and only one that went the pound.

And I've fished with fly for small mahseer at a place called Kirta, where there's a swift and rock-girt stream not so very far from Sibi; and there got into a three-pounder which, on a fine cast and a small Zulu fly and in that swiftly flowing stream, took me a good fifteen minutes to land. They're great fighters, the mahseer. And not so far from Jhansi in the Betwa River, where it runs among the crumbling tombs of Orchha, I've fished at times among the little Indian trout, a silvery, speckled fish not unlike a grayling, and a wonderful little fighter. So, having naught to tell of

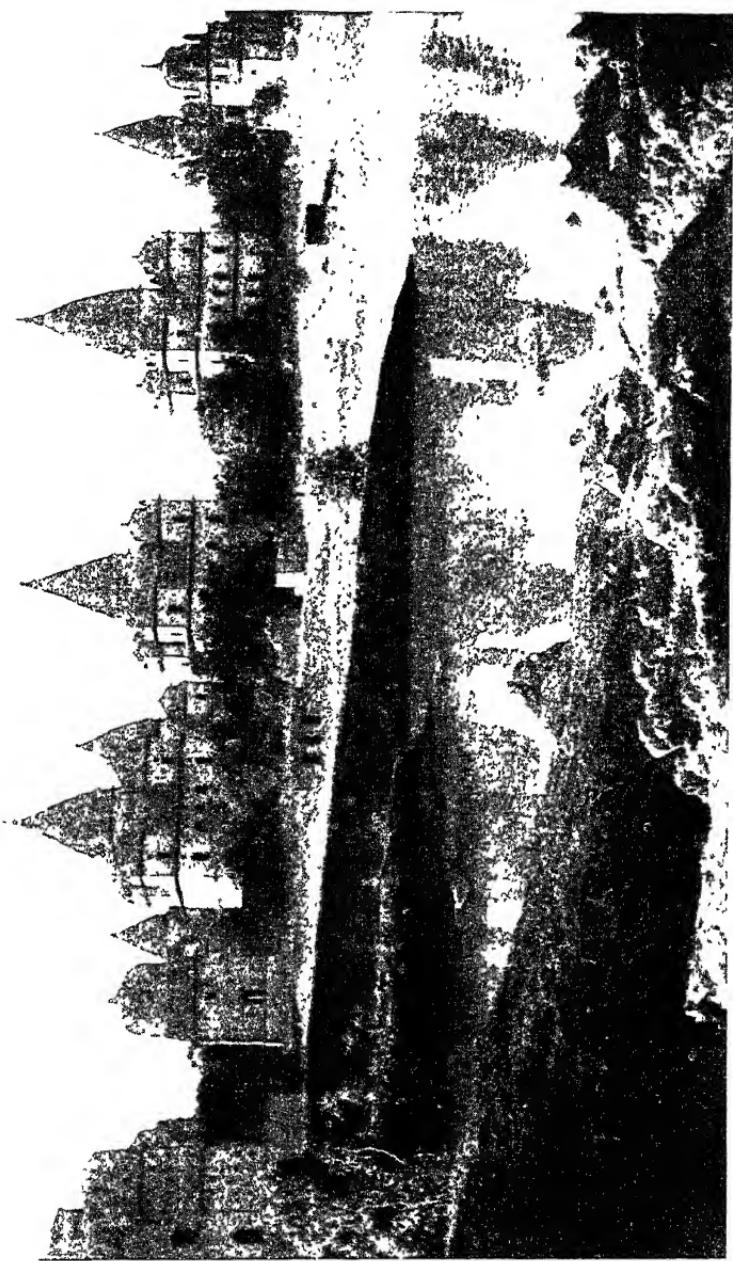
Great Days

fish and fishing, I'll just relate a small incident which happened there one fiery day before the rains, which has a moral to it and a good deal of sting.

... a plate high piled with smoking eggs and bacon, clean plates and mugs, bread, butter, jam, all nicely laid out on the parched turf down by the river side. And not so far away, upon a sizzling log, a kettle boiling merrily, an excellent breakfast obviously and ready for the eating. Hard by, beneath a tree, a fishing-rod, with small float riding quietly, a couple of hand-lines out and pegged to shore, and not so far away upon the sandy bank a lone pith helmet lying . . . sadly alone, and not a soul in sight . . . !

It had been at 5.30 a.m., and in a grey half-light, that I had been awakened from the odious depths of a late hot weather slumber; and at that ghastly moment I took a particular dislike to the face of my bearer as it peered insistently at me through the meshes of mosquito-net—disliked it intently; in fact, I went one better: I positively hated it. But, gradually bringing to mind that it was Sunday and also fishing, life slowly began to take on a different and more cheery hue. Twenty minutes later I was in the car and at the cross-roads near the Cinema, where the rest of the party—Corporal Drinkwater and Privates Crabbe and Oakes—were already assembled with the paraphernalia for the day.

Orchha lies twelve miles from Jhansi, an ancient city of the past, full of old ruins and mossy rotting tombs. Through it the Betwa River runs, a turgid rushing torrent in the Rains, on this particular day a sleepy stream, boulder-tossed and shallow, now break-



*Tombs of Orchha—
Betwa River*

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ing into swiftly flowing currents, now great pools, unfathomable and deep, hinting of mighty fish in their dark green-grey depths. Beneath an ancient rampart we left the car and scrambled down to the river bank, following it for some three hundred yards till at last we came to where a mighty tomb, with crumbling base a good solid twenty feet in height, reared itself high above the river brink. Beneath it lay a wondrous pool, and there I left the others bent on paste and worm, and hurried on up-stream to the narrower rapids and more sheltered pools, where the little trout rise gaily to a fly or spoon. "Don't wait breakfast! Eggs and bacon in the tiffin basket. Cook some for me when I come back—ten o'clock maybe." A cheery wave, a "Right-o, sir! Good luck . . ."

Have you ever tried to throw a fly-spoon with a regimental fishing club rod? No? Well, don't! I'd got no rod to hand, so had to. This one was an all-metal affair seven feet in length, with enormous snake rings, and a reel completely out of all proportion, attached not below, but just above the grip. Heavens, the balance! The topmost ferrule was no ring at all, but a queer contraption, in shape and form somewhat like the "cage" over which our grandparents would always lose their tempers when indulging in the ancient game of croquet. And the line, that was of ordinary twine, and far too amiably disposed. Indeed, the wetter it got the tighter it clung. Towards the end it was difficult to get a line out at all. But at first things went not too badly. The air was still cool, a pleasant little breeze had sprung up, and the sport was middling fair. But as the sun got slowly higher and the breeze began to go and little drops of sweat began slowly to trickle down my nose—well, by this time, still no more than half-past eight, the one and only fly-spoon having

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come adrift, it was obviously time for eggs and bacon. So back I went. But, presently drawing near to the ancient tomb and pleasantly hopeful of a good breakfast, I was just a little bit surprised to find no sign of anyone about. At first I thought they'd moved their pitch; but presently, reaching the ledge and looking down—behold . . . !

And so we come to where the story first began.

. . . But where the devil could they be? It was puzzling—damnably puzzling! And the more I looked and the less I found, the more and more puzzling it became. Indeed, it was beginning to get a bit unpleasantly mysterious. What the devil to make of it? Where on earth had they gone? It might have been a bathe—but not with all that breakfast waiting. Those fishing things? That lone pith helmet—I didn't like that a bit . . . Eerie . . . mysterious! . . . That faint grey shadow deep down in the pool . . . a sudden *ping!* —and then again—and yet again—*ping! ping!—Biz biz!* . . . And then I'd got the answer—and was off and down that bank like half a dozen scalded cats.

Half-way to the car I came upon Privates Crabbe and Oakes, and they were still hard at it pulling stings out of arms and neck. But, apparently mindful of a good meal left behind a tentative reconnaissance was in progress, for the air was still lit with the sharp *biz-z!* of the swiftly-zitting bee. So for the moment we went back to the car, and there I found the unfortunate Drinkwater sitting inside it, looking exceedingly dazed, and obviously still feeling that somehow, in the homely term of the Indian frontiersman, he'd been caught with his trousers down, though not quite understanding it; which, indeed, he had. However, the application of a strong solution of permanganate (which happened to be the only thing I had about me,

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in case of snake-bite, and which I hoped might help), together with the assurance that bee-sting was a known and excellent cure for rheumatism, produced the desired effect, and I was at last able to discover something of what had taken place.

Apparently, unaware of a swarm of bees—unpleasant brutes a good two inches long—which hung in a huge cluster from the coping of the tomb far away above their heads, they had cheerfully set about getting things ready for breakfast—and, incidentally, a wood fire. So that, just about the time that the eggs were cooked, and the bacon sizzling, and the kettle doing its best to sing, so must the bees have decided that, though a little of a thing was all right in its way, that little had now developed into a lot, and they'd had about as much as they were going to stand. Two of them, Crabbe and Oakes, had made a bolt for it along the shore, but Drinkwater had plunged headlong into the river. Which was perfectly all right so long as he kept below. But when at length, not being blessed with the lungs of an amphibian, he'd had to come up for a breather, what with topee on shore, and hair getting just a trifle thin—well . . .

Need I prolong the agony? All I would say is that, whilst most heartily glad it was not I, one could only feel the profoundest admiration for the stoical way those three made light of what must have been a mighty painful experience. I would even wonder whether to Corporal Drinkwater's mind it was not almost as hot a corner as when in 1918 he won his Military Medal.

So out we went and, by means of a good deal of stealth, recovered and ate our most excellent breakfast. And later, as luck would have it, Crabbe caught a five and a half pound mahseer; and what, I ask, do a few

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bee-stings matter when that happens? So now you understand one side of the story, and the moral's this: If you go out on shikhar and want to light a fire, for goodness' sake don't light it just underneath a swarm of bees!

CHAPTER XIII

NOWHERE IN PARTICULAR AGAIN

I SUPPOSE it is the ambition of any fisherman to catch a salmon. It has most certainly always been mine. But so far the opportunity has not come my way. Indeed, the nearest I've ever got to it was to catch a sea-trout. Some years ago I was staying with an angling parson in Wales. Unfortunately there was no question of my trying for a salmon, but one day I was sent off with a permit in my pocket, which my host had very kindly procured for me, to fish for sea-trout in a certain reach of private water. He was far from optimistic. The water was low and glassy. He wouldn't even be bothered to go out himself. Still, he said, there was always beginner's luck, so it might be worth my trying. And yet, when I got down to the river and, as I stood on the bank and put my rod together, watched fish after fish splashing away under the further bank, I really couldn't help feeling that it ought to be possible for something to be done about it. I'd so have liked to see one caught. But, "No spate, no fishing!" my host had said; and seeing that there was no one else about but myself, I felt he must be right. However, undeterred, I rigged up my cast as quickly as I could, and having added one of the gauzy-looking flies he had given me, away I went. And at the end of a couple of hours' hard flogging hadn't had even the tiniest rise.

By this time I reckoned I'd got to about the end of

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my beat. But at that moment I noted, scarce two hundred yards behind me, a particularly formidable looking bull manœuvring his way down to the river. So, hoping he'd only come down to drink and would soon be gone, I fished on a bit further and so came to the most marvellous of pools. It lay on the further side of a great bridge over which the main road ran, glinting and deep, and lovely little ripples at the further end. The surface was positively alive with splashing fish. I felt that here, at least, I must get one. So down I crept, and at the end of yet another half-hour's flogging hadn't had so much as the slightest rise.

It seemed pretty obvious that a fly was no use at all. Fortunately my host had advised me to take a tin of worms in case all else failed. It might, he thought, be worth the trying. So on went a worm and into the water with it, and in a second I was into a fine little sea-trout which, after the terrific fight it gave, surprised me when it turned the scale at a bare two pounds. But that was good enough. So on went another worm and out came another trout, same size, same weight. And then I felt I'd better stop. It seemed a bit too easy. Besides, I've never cared over much for bait if there's the slightest chance with fly.

So I rigged my fly up again, and the bull now having very kindly gone, I started to fish my way steadily home, and ended up with nothing more. However, I'd got my two fine sea-trout, and away I went and showed them to my host. He was obviously delighted, but equally obviously surprised; indeed, I might almost have said nonplussed. First he'd balance them in one hand and then in the other; and then he'd frown and then he'd shake his head. And yet I don't think I really paid much attention to it, not till he gave a sudden start at something I was saying:

Nowhere in Particular Again

"Eh?" he exclaimed. "What?—*Where* did you say?"

"In the pool below the bridge——"

"Pool?—Bridge?" He peered at me. "What bridge?"

"The road bridge——"

"The *what* bridge?"

"The one the main road runs over," I patiently explained. He could be splendidly deaf if he wished to be. "The beggars were jumping in all directions," I added. "An awful pity you weren't——"

"With a——" he cut in, "—*a worm!*"

I nodded.

"Good God!" he said—at least, perhaps not exactly that, being a parson, but something very like it.

Well, there it was! I'd poached those fish, and yet it wasn't quite my fault. Because, not thinking I'd ever get so far, he'd never thought to warn me. And so too late I found that that especial pool was strictly kept for fly. But, there it was, and nothing to do but laugh. So off we went and drank a health to those two first sea-trout of mine, and hoped no one had seen and so no one the wiser.

I spent two or three more days fishing for the crafty little Welsh brown trout. But the lateness of the season and the glassiness of the water combined were completely against me, so I had but little luck. It is the one and only time I've fished these streams, but if the conditions are the same elsewhere in Wales, I honestly don't feel very drawn towards them. For, apart from the thrill and excitement in the water, there was also a bit too much thrill and excitement on the bank. It was the bulls! The river seemed to swarm with them. In England the farmer, when he puts his bull to grass, generally sees that it is in a fairly secure field. He sometimes also adds a kindly notice to warn unwary

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people. But not so in Wales, apparently. There the farmer turns them loose to wander where they will, mainly, as far as I could gather, down along the water front. Exactly how many I met, or met me, I've really no idea. It was sufficiently numerous. My host would laugh and promise me they were quite harmless, I needn't worry. No more I did—at first, but took good care to make a wide circuit when I met one.

Two I got to know a bit too well. One was when I was busy fishing the pool just where the railway arches ran. I was in waders and well out in midstream. My wife was with me that day; and just as well, for it was her frantic yell which saved me first, and a narrow ledge at base of one of those great arches next. For, looking round, barely twenty yards away was a great red bull coming straight at me, his grunts and splashings drowned in the roar of the stream. Two frantic strides I took and I was up and on that ledge. And mighty lucky, for twice he chased me round, but thanks to my little ledge I was able to move the faster and so just managed to keep my lead. So at last, to my profound relief, he gave me up as a bad job, and letting out a bellowing roar, ploughed away and disappeared across the ridge; whilst I clambered down and, mopping clammy brow, got on once more with my fishing. That was the first. The second happened on a day when both my host and I were fishing. I'd left him plying a worm in a deep pool for sea-trout. But later on, from further up the stream, noting from the bend of his rod that he was obviously into a heavy fish, and anxious not to miss the fun, I turned about and hastened off to join him. And as I started back I saw him wave, and heard a distant shout, and then another; and, thinking help must be needed badly, off I went as hard as I could leg—at least, as hard as my heavy

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waders would allow, and one that day was most unpleasantly tight. And the more I legged it the more he yelled, which merely made me redouble my efforts. Indeed, so heedless was I of aught save that curving rod, that it was just a matter of luck that I didn't impale myself upon the horns of a fat and pleasant cow, which to my horror and amazement I suddenly recognised to be a very angry bull.

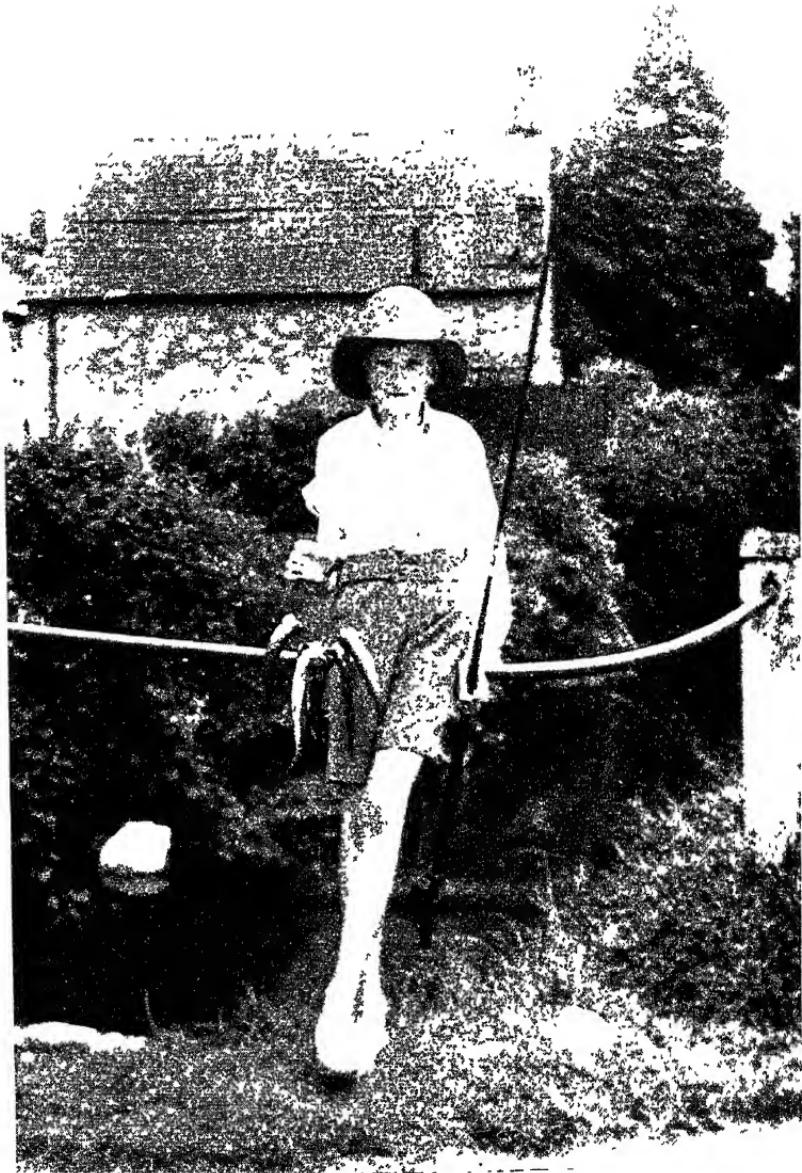
Fortunately one's brain works pretty quick on such occasions. It took me just about two seconds to plunge into the stream and make the other bank, and mighty glad to find the bull not following. And I was just in the nick of time to watch a splendid seven-pound sea-trout gaffed. And yet, after all that hectic rush of mine, I couldn't help feeling just a trifle sore at my host's surprised and somewhat cryptic: "Help?—but surely you can't use a gaff? I only thought you didn't spot the bull." He chuckled, stringing on another worm. "Beggar'd just seen me off the other bank. I thought you mightn't know." And that was that. Anyhow, I'd been in at the death, and that was the main thing. But no wonder my wader had been a trifle tight; for when I got back that evening and took it off, out dropped a large toad, very flat, and quite dead. And that, I promise you, is not a fisherman's yarn. It's quite true.

The biggest trout I ever caught was in my old home waters at Ashton Keynes. It was some three years ago. I was back on leave from India. The mayfly was on, but conditions were not too good that year. The floods were badly out. April had been the worst on record. The river ran bank high, and often far out into the fields. The fly itself was very intermittent, a cold north wind combined with depth of water stopping the fly from hatching properly.

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But at last there came a day when I awoke to find the wind had changed. It was a lovely balmy morning, the little breeze there was coming from the south, and everywhere a blue and cloudless sky. An absolutely ideal day. So off I went to Brown's, the deepish bit of water just above the Charity Land. But when I reached the stream, although a fly or two were floating down, there wasn't the slightest sign of any fish about. Indeed, it wasn't till I came to the big pool that at last I saw a nicely rising trout. He was at the back of it, just beneath my bank, and the first fly I sent fell among the reeds. But, anxious not to scare my only rising fish, I gave the line a flick—a nasty *Crack!* and some six inches of my top came back. So there was I, two miles from home, without a spare, a broken top, and not a hope of splicing it. My only chance was to whittle off the end with my pocket-knife, down to the topmost ring, which in deepest dudgeon I did, and tried a cast. And much to my surprise got out quite a good line, and a moment later had that merry little one-pound trout kicking among the grasses.

So, highly pleased, yet none too happy with that stumped-up rod, I started off for the car to go and get another top. But strolling on a bit towards the lower end of the field, merely with a view to spying out the land, lo and behold! a really enormous trout rising steadily underneath the hedge. Now it was a rotten spot just where that great trout lay, for it was just midway between two high and overhanging willows on the nearer bank, and well beneath a quickset hedge upon the further. A moment I stood and cursed that broken rod. So great a trout! What ever should I do? Was I to risk a splashing cast or rush away and get another top? And what if in the interval he'd gone? I scratched my head and, as I did so, up he came, a



“Dave”

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long, dark shadow far beneath the hedge, a gentle suck, then down again. I wavered horribly. The most difficult of shots, difficult enough at best of times . . . and then he rose again! That did it.

Stealthily and on all fours I crawled in as near to that soggy bank as I dared. Then mighty careful of those overhanging trees, measured my cast, and threw. Down on the surface sank the fly, soft as a feather, and floated by. No dreaded splash, and yet a foot too short. Not the slightest notice did that great trout take, but merely rose and took another fly. A score of times I cast, yet always just too short. And all the time he rose, but only took the fly which passed directly above his head. That broken top! I just couldn't do the other foot. It really made me curse! Presently I stopped and drew back a bit to ease my cramping limbs. Hardly had I moved than up came that fish again, and yet again. One thing to do—rush off and get another top! But, as I turned to go, so he too rose again, and a sudden sunbeam catching him in flank, showed him up in all his yellow glory. Again I hesitated. Full twenty minutes it would take to get that other top. Twenty minutes—and he'd as like be gone! I simply didn't dare to risk it. And so I risked the other thing, and on flat of stomach, crawled in that extra foot, and threw again. And luck, indeed, was mine! A perfect cast! Like softest down the line uncoiled beneath the hedge, and laid that fly as soft as butter a dozen inches just above his head. And up he came, like a great duck beneath the surface, a tiny suck—and then my rod went down.

Hard down the stream he sped. Grimly I steadied him till scarce a yard remained. Then slowly back he came. Twice he went plunging up the stream, then twice more plunging down. Each time I gave the

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butt, each time that stout line held. Twelve sorry yards between those willow trees I had to play him in. But on it went, and still the line held good. Ten minutes I must have played that fish, then slowly drew him in . . . across the net . . . a heave . . . then up the bank, and there he was upon the grass, a lovely fish, indeed. Four pounds he scaled, and now in a fine glass case he floats, serene and proud, up on the top of a bookcase among the dim shadows of my hall.

Some of my pleasantest memories take me back to the Devonshire streams and their sporting little trout. There were the Rivers Exe and Barle at Dulverton, for instance. I always stayed at the Carnarvon Arms, a most excellent hotel, with a fine five-mile stretch of water where one could fish for either trout or salmon. But, apart from that, my stays there have always pleasant memories for me, partly for its charm and comfort and the excellence of its fare, and partly because of the very charming people one never failed to meet there. There was always, too, a pleasant and friendly rivalry in the day's bag; and it was the custom, as I have no doubt it is in other fishing hotels as well, to display each individual catch upon a sideboard in the hall. A pleasant and amusing custom generally, but which on one occasion very nearly turned out for me a trifle more amusing than I bargained for.

The hotel itself lay nice and close to the river. To reach the latter one had but to step out of the front door, through a homely, well-kept garden, across a stretch of grass, and within a few minutes could start to throw a fly. The river ran broad and deep. Fine pools lay in the hollows and the bends. It was as well to fish in thigh-boots or waders: often the stream was girt on either side by drooping bush and tree. Many a stretch of bank as well. There was one particular

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piece I always liked the best. It ran through sunny meadowland down by the Hatchery, broad and rippling at first, but tailing off gradually into deeper water where the stream began to bend. Many a good trout did I catch there, but it always takes me back to a certain fellow-angler who arrived at the hotel one day, an elderly novice hopeful to catch his first salmon. But rain was badly needed. The fish were sulky. The experts, who'd toiled for days, could offer little hope. But out he set, and beginning on the deeper water in that favourite bit of mine, at very opening cast was into a fine and heavy fish. And this I learnt from the water bailiff who was with him, for I happened to be fishing not so very far away and, seeing an obviously doubled rod, had put down my own and hurried across to watch.

By the time I arrived he'd apparently been into the fish a good ten minutes, and it looked hopeful that he'd as good as got it caught. Till now, I learnt, the fish had merely sulked. But just about this time he must have changed his mind, and now was obviously fully bent on getting off down-stream. I don't quite know what happened at the angler's end. All I know is that one moment deep down in that pool I saw a flashing silver curve, above, a curving rod, a singling line . . . then—*bang!* . . . Now, had I been that man, how I'd have raved and cursed! But not so he. A stolid Scot, he just reeled in, and never said a word. Not even when the bailiff tried the cast—and cracked it bit by bit; then shrugged, and dourly smiled . . . *Last year's!* . . .

It must have been about this time that there happened to me that unfortunate occasion to which I have already referred. There was a distant piece of water which so far I hadn't tried. It was my first visit, and I hadn't yet got as far as that. But hearing a good deal

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of talk about this particular bit one evening, and the difficulties of fishing there, I determined to go out next day and see what could be done about it. So, having got what seemed to me adequate instructions, off I went, and after a good hour's steady trudging came upon the jolliest of little streams.

It was a beautiful, soft spring day, and raining steadily. I had a badger and a blue upright on, and both seemed equally effective. The fish were positively greedy; there was no other word for it. How many I put back I shouldn't like to say, but towards time for tea I counted a dozen and a half nice fish in my bag, and not one below ten inches. Which with an eight-inch limit really wasn't bad. So being by this time thoroughly soaked, I turned for home, dwelling pleasantly in my mind, as I trudged along, upon the envious glances which would fall on my fine fish presently laid out upon the table in the hall.

Now, just where the little stream met the greater hotel water, I came upon the water bailiff, a small and dapper man, though just a trifle dour. The rain-drops fell in a pleasant cascade from the brim of his ancient hat as he returned my cheery greeting. He was very pleased to hear I'd had so good a day, measuring in expert hands the fish I drew at random from my bag. "Indeed a nice fish!" said he thoughtfully. "Well nigh on half a pound." He passed it back. Then, with one of his dour smiles, turned again to go; but half across his shoulder—"Of course, you know that water's private. The hotel bit's just on beyond." He smiled again, a bit more cheerfully, I thought, this time, and then was gone . . .

And I! Well, what was I to do? Ye gods! . . . So that was why! . . . *Poaching!* . . . Good heavens above! . . . I likewise turned, but only to stagger on.

Nowhere in Particular Again

For now my glorious day was done and gone; a pleasant glowing warmth turned now to chilly cold. I stood and thought. Those eighteen lovely fish!—this mighty bag!—spread out on that infernal table in the hall!—*all poached!* . . . Incredible! I couldn't do it! Those grinning faces! . . . Yet something must be done. I racked my addled brains. Only one thing to do—reduce the bag, hope nobody would know. And that, with horrible reluctance, I set about to do. And all the rest of that miserable walk home turned over and over again in my fevered mind the letter I might yet be forced to write. And, coming now to water I knew well, dabbled a fly, and at every cast drew out a fine big trout. And back it had to go! Eight fish I'd kept, and eight it must remain. No more! That way no questions asked—or so, at least, I hoped . . .

But by the time I reached the hotel I'd changed my mind again. Often as not it's best to face the music. So off I went to find the proprietor, the old Mr. Nelder, always a most kind and helpful man. As luck would have it, he was in, busy in the office among his books. To him I poured out my tale. I felt at least he'd tell me what to do. He did! He fairly chortled. It seemed the best joke he'd ever heard. "Poaching, good lord! Don't you worry! That's old Somebody Something's water. Silly old ass! Serves him jolly well right!" And that was all he'd got to say about it. Exactly why or how it served him right I thought better not to enquire. The ethics didn't seem quite right, but that, I felt, was my host's affair. It didn't seem to worry him; why let it worry me? So offering him my best of thanks, and glad to get rid of the fish on him and try to forget all about them, I hurried off to change my sodden clothes and have a badly needed

Great Days

drink. But, still feeling a bit shy about it, what struck me as the even greater kindness was that, though obviously regarding it as a tremendous joke, he kept it to himself—at least, till I was gone.

I was staying one year up on Dartmoor, away above where the picturesque little town of Okehampton nestles deep down in the hollow. I was attending an Artillery Practice Camp, and there one day, among the queer little bogs and the purple moorland heather, fell into conversation with an ancient shepherd, who held me spellbound with the tales he told of wondrous bags of trout he used to make in these little streams. Unfortunately I hadn't brought a rod, but often I'd sit and watch the tiny rising trout and wish to goodness I had. Tiny trout, indeed, but my ancient friend completely staggered me when he spoke of sixty or eighty in a day. About the present he was just a trifle sour. "Bain't the fish thur used to be, zur," he confided sadly. "Woy, Oi'd git a dozen avour braxvus-time, Oi wud . . . zim as now Oi'd be gettin' one! . . . Reckon thur be too many wi' rods about . . . ah, thank-ee koindly, zur!" And he gave his rutted old face a screw, pocketed the coin, and whistling to his collie dog, was away and off again, clambering swiftly up to where his woolly charges cropped on a distant mountain-side. Too many wi' rods! I chuckled. Too many villainous old rogues like you, I thought, who've skinned these wretched streams!

It's a very wonderful country, Devonshire. For me it has always a particular charm. There's the cream, for instance, that lovely golden clotted stuff. And that wondrous drive in early spring down the Great West Road, where suddenly you plunge into a land of rich red loamy soil, valleys and hills, a world of trees and foaming streams, pleasantly snug little towns and

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villages. And then the moors, and where else in the world could anything be finer? Only last year I was up at Chagford for a few weeks' early fishing. And, in case you, too, should go, it's as well to have a car; for then there's choice of either Teign or Dart, and all the little moorland streams as well. High up on the Dartmoor slopes it stands, a pleasant, old-world town—or village maybe; it's just a bit of both—with narrow, winding streets all climbing up to where, in the very midst of a tiniest market square, stands the ancient "toll house." A queer little edifice, now in main a curio shop. And if you care to step inside and take a look at the odd assortment—bits of china, glass, furniture, brass—and maybe buy a piece, you'll see among them, fixed upon a wall, a board whereon you'll still make out the ancient tolls for market standings, and the loft where the hurdles were kept stored.

I've always found, when fishing these Devonshire streams, that it's well worth looking up the local expert on the subject of flies. On this occasion I'd been given the name of a Mr. Perrott; so, coming to a house just opposite the curio shop, which, though looking more like a private dwelling, bore his name above the door, I gave a discreet knock and, getting no response, a couple more. A kindly local standing near enlightened me: "Ee step right in, zur! That Mister Perrott ee be main 'ard o' 'earing." So thanking him kindly, I turned the handle and stepped in. And there, on the far side of a table of such proportions that it seemed to fill the room, in a chair before the fire sat a rather elderly gentleman, spectacles on nose and very busy making up a fly. Beside him on a tray was piled a weird assortment—feathers, bits of silk, hooks, tinsel, wire. He bade me welcome. I found him a fund of information. No one could have been more kindly

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or full of help. He'd been the expert even in my father's days, and that was nearly fifty years ago. "Ninety-seven—that's my age, sir," he told me proudly. "And I'll be off to try a fly as soon as the weather gets a bit milder." A really marvellous man! I could scarcely credit it, the age and then the energy.

Our talk fell presently to flies. From half a dozen cardboard boxes he rummaged out a pile of bags, all bulging full of flies. Every sort and kind he had, hackle or winged, and pretty rough they looked. Not that I told him so, but he promised me they were the goods. So I let him fix me up, and, quite right, they were. One evening I ran out of a particular favourite fly of mine. It was rather late in the day, but I took the remaining fly up to him to see if he could let me have a couple like it by the morning. He was really almost huffed. A couple! I could have a score! I ordered six. And there they were next morning, and six more if I'd wanted them. Indeed, a most remarkable man! I think I could almost wish to live to ninety-seven if it were promised me that I should be equally "yat" when I came to it.

And now I'll draw one final picture. We're back where we began, in my dear old Vicarage home again. Chagford's a pleasant memory. Dave's holidays are up. Three short days here *en route*, and then it's back to school again. The poor old stream is dry, or something like. The drought last year has killed it. There's scarce an inch of water in it even now. Indeed, I've hardly bothered to put my rod together. But not so David, rising twelve—my son. He's never left the mill stream or the Covet Hole since the moment we arrived. He's seen some white fish, so he says. He's right. There are. He swears he's seen a trout. I know that too; so does his grandfather. He's wrong. There

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isn't one! But let him think there is. He's young, so what's it matter? It all adds to the thrill.

And now I'm full of lunch. The family have gone their various ways; and so have I—the drawing-room, a comfortable chair, a cosy fire, my pipe, the *Daily Mail*. A little nap . . . alas, that Indian habit, how it clings! . . . *Cr-e-a-k!* . . . Hell! now, that's the door. . . .

It slowly opens—an ancient flop hat appears; beneath a face, red, a trifle anxious. . . .

"I say . . . Dad? . . . Sorry! . . . Are you awake?"

Awake be blowed! What the——! Can't one be allowed to read in peace even at this time of day? Down the paper goes. "Hullo, old boy!——" Why ever can't the young do as their elders? Why, after a good meal, must they always want to ramp and roar? "Well, what's the trouble?" The door slides just a trifle wider. A bit more of Dave slides in. An ancient, grubby mackintosh, a pair of black gum-boots. . . . "What's all that kit on for?"

A shrug, a smile: "It's raining—just a bit."

Obvious! Why, when one's feeling crusty, must one always ask such foolish questions? "Better come in, then——"

"Oh, no, Dad! I want a cast."

"Well, I gave you one."

"Yes, but that was for a worm."

"Well, isn't that good enough?"

"I want a fly. There're some white fish rising."

Gawd! Had I to get up and find a cast! Was it for this I'd taught the young blighter to throw a fly? By Gad, though!—In my pocket-book——! I searched. Thank heavens, there it was, the ancient cast I'd put there when I'd taken down my rod at Chagford, a somewhat ragged fly, a blue upright, one

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of Mr. Perrott's specials. White fish will take well-nigh anything. It'd have to do! . . .

"Oh, I say! Thanks *awfully*, Dad!"

"Right-o, old boy! Clear off—and good luck."

"All right! Sorry to have woken you."

"You *didn't* wake me!" Damn the boy! Exit.

Thankfully I betook me to my paper again. . . .

"Mr. Lloyd George says . . . Mr. Zikes, the famous astrologer, lecturing on the prospects of another drought . . . Are we nearer war? Lord Bleeding-leigh . . ."

. . . That door again! "Hullo, old boy!"

"Sorry! Did I wake you up?"

"Yes, you did! However—any luck?"

In he slides again. There's an ancient fishing-bag of mine across his shoulders, reaching somewhere near his knees. He looks exceeding wet, and slightly smug. He gives the bag a heave, then slowly starts to draw from it to all appearance a never-ending length of golden yellow. Ye gods! A trout! And there, indeed, it was, affectionately held in a pair of grubby little hands, a lovely yellow trout, a pound and a half at least.

"Well—I'm jiggered!" was all I'd got to say.
"Wherever on earth did you get that?"

"Under the arch."

"Arch! What arch?"

"Just outside the drive." He gave a half-apologetic shrug of shoulder. "You see, I thought I heard something go *plop!* under the arch, so I put the fly under——"

"Not the one I gave you?"

"Yes—and it nearly jerked the rod clean out of my hand. And then after a bit I got it out of the arch, and I didn't know it was quite so big till then, and then I remembered I'd forgotten the net——"

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"That was clever," I agreed. It's what little boys generally do. "Well, what did *you* do then?"

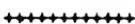
"I just didn't know," he confessed candidly. "But there was a boy watching, so I gave him the rod and got down on my stomach and got it in my hands." He stroked the fish affectionately. "I didn't expect to."

"I don't expect you did," I agreed. "But miracles do occasionally happen!" I couldn't have done it. No more could his grandfather, who'd just come in and stood there positively gaping. "Cut along to Maggie, old boy,"—it was obvious he was itching to be gone—"and get it weighed."

THE END

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